This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

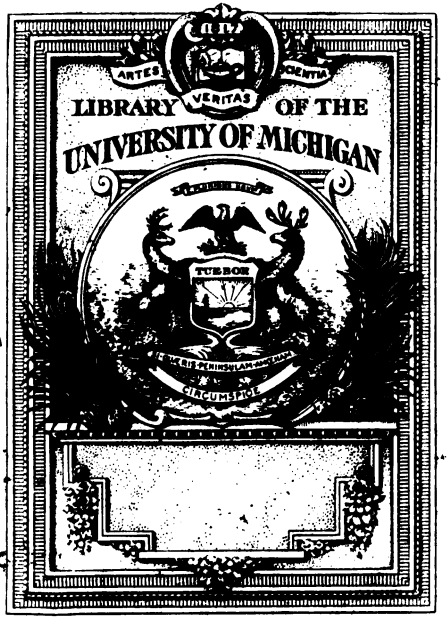
Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`


ARTES
VERITAS
SCIENTIA
LIBRARY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
TUEBOR
SI QUAERIS PENINSULAM AMOENAM
CIRCUMSPICE

Collins, Mortimer
Works

828
C7128
1892
v.2

SWEET ANNE PAGE

By MORTIMER COLLINS

AUTHOR OF

"FRANCES," "BLACKSMITH AND SCHOLAR," "THE VILLAGE COMEDY," ETC.

A NEW EDITION

London

CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1884

Libr.
Gregory
11-5-26
32953
12v. in 11

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	THE LANGTONS, TANNERS	1
II.	MR. PAGE THE BOTANIST	10
III.	THE BRANSCOMBES AT BREAKFAST	16
IV.	STEPHEN AT SCHOOL	24
V.	A LUSTRUM	36
VI.	OF AGE	46
VII.	MR. PAGE'S WILL	57
VIII.	THE PANTHER'S WOOING	67
IX.	IN A GONDOLA	77
X.	ON AN ISLAND	86
XI.	ANOTHER WOOER	98
XII.	AIAIE	108
XIII.	AN ELOPEMENT	116
XIV.	STEPHEN IN LONDON	126
XV.	MR. AND MRS. MORFILL	139
XVI.	ISOLA CHESTER	147
XVII.	STEPHEN'S DREAM	155
XVIII.	THE PANTHER WOOED	161
XIX.	THE OLD WOLF	170
XX.	ISOLA ROSA	179
XXI.	THREE LOVE AFFAIRS	185
XXII.	THE GATHERING OF THE CLANS	196
XXIII.	PRINGLE	207
XXIV.	A GLASS OF MONTRACHET	213
XXV.	THE WOLF'S DEN	218

11-6-36

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXVI.	MÉNAGE OU MÉNAGERIE?	226
XXVII.	MORFILL'S APPOINTMENT	238
XXVIII.	STEPHEN LANGTON'S GUEST	242
XXIX.	A BLACK NIGHT'S WORK	252
XXX.	FATHER AND DAUGHTER	265
XXXI.	BEHIND IN LONDON	272
XXXII.	FAUST AND MEPHISTOPHELES	280
XXXIII.	PADDING—AND CONFESSION	288
XXXIV.	THE EARL IN PURSUIT	291
XXXV.	EDWARD, EARL OF SHOTTESBROOKE	296
XXXVI.	VENDETTA	302
XXXVII.	ISOLA AND STEPHEN	308
XXXVIII.	VOCERO	312
XXXIX.	TEN YEARS AFTER	316

SWEET ANNE PAGE.

CHAPTER I.

THE LANGTONS, TANNERS.

"STEPHEN!" exclaimed a shrill-voiced young lady of thirty-five, "what are you doing now?"

This was Stephen Langton's aunt, Harriet, his bitterest foe, his perpetual persecutor. She was a lanky personage, with reddish hair, bluish eyes, no eyelashes to speak of, and a figure whose waist might be anywhere. Her utterance was always a whining scold. Every incident of life was to her a subject of complaint. She was the terror of the whole family, except her father; and, as old Stephen Langton, the tanner, had never been known to fear anything, he was not likely to begin with his own daughter. She was quiet enough in his presence, awed by his stormy voice and ready hand. Ten years before, for some slight opposition to his will, he had boxed her ears in the presence of a gathering of his neighbours, among whom was the only young man who had seemed to take a fancy to her; and she was well aware that he was just as impetuous as ever.

Little Stephen, a bright-haired, blue-eyed boy of eleven, was coiled in a window-seat of the old wainscoted room. A book was in his hand, Bunyan's "Holy War;" he was reading for the twentieth time of the siege of Mansoul, that city whose besiegers never relax their efforts; but ever and anon he looked across the street to the windows of a large quiet house just opposite.

The house in which the Langtons lived had instead of a front door a wide archway, through which waggons laden with oak-bark and raw hides entered, and waggons laden with leather came out. To the right, as you passed under this archway, was the dwelling-house; to the left, a shop fronting the street, and spacious warehouses; behind, a courtyard, stables, gardens, orchards; and farthest of all the tanyard, which was bounded at the foot of the hill by a stream, which it greatly defiled. The house was old and large, with lofty rooms and closets innumer-

able; the front parlour was the principal living room of the family. It had two windows; little Stephen was in the window-seat to the left, while at the other sat his grandmother, bolt upright, knitting stockings. She sat there from morning till night, never rising to join in any of the meals, which were served on a small table at her side. She occasionally uttered some brief oracular sentence, of which no one took the slightest notice. She had been stupefied years before by her husband's brutality.

Her grandson Stephen was an orphan. His mother died at his birth; his father when he was five years old. Stephen did not realise his father's death. He often loitered through the Cathedral Close and under the school cloisters, and along the meadowy margin of the river Idle, in the hope of meeting him. He was a strange dreamy boy, whom his uncles and aunts despised, because they could not understand him. Nor did he get on at all with his cousins, of whom there were several of both sexes; for, Miss Harriet excepted, all the Langtons were married and prolific.

Miss Harriet officiated as schoolmistress to all but Stephen. He was rather older than any of his cousins, but his aunt's reason for giving him up was his pertinacity in asking questions which she was unable to answer. So he was sent just now to an old-fashioned day-school in which boys and girls were mixed, and where he had positively managed to fall in love already. There is nothing strange in that; but it so happened that Stephen's little love-fancy was destined to colour his whole life.

"What a lazy boy you are!" went on Aunt Harriet. "Have you no lessons to learn? You learn nothing at Miss Martin's."

"Not very much, aunt," said Stephen. "She never will answer my questions. I asked her to-day whether she didn't think Christian in the 'Pilgrim's Progress' a very bad man for running away from his wife, and she called me a wicked boy, and made me stand on the form."

"She ought to have given you a good whipping, sir," said his aunt. "What had that to do with your lessons? Go and learn your spelling directly."

"He's a very tiresome boy," said his grandmother in her oracular way.

Stephen got up, took Carpenter's Spelling-Book in his hand, and retreated. It was a soft summer evening, and the boy wandered down through garden and orchard into the tanyard beyond. Thence he found his way to the brook, and strolled along its margin through the meadows, which were rimmed with the fainting flush of sunset. He loitered and dreamed. With this child the difference between reality and dream was indistinctly marked. His waking fancies, his dreams of the early morning, were often more real to him than his grandfather's stern presence or his maiden aunt's endless scold. He read over and over again all the books that he found readable among the scanty supply which the house afforded. In a healthy household

he would have had "Robinson Crusoe" and the "Arabian Nights"—would have voyaged with Sindbad, and gone underground with Aladdin. But the only books he could find were Milton's "Paradise Lost" and the works of John Bunyan, and these he almost knew by heart. He loved to identify himself with the characters. He had, it must be confessed, great sympathy with Satan in the epic, and liked to fancy himself the exploring arch-fiend, winging his way through chaos. But often he was Abdiel the faithful, or Ithuriel, with the keen spear of truth; and this very evening, as the sun sank to the verge, he had imagined himself Uriel whom John beheld from Patmos. He revelled also in Ezekiel's visions, and in the Apocalypse. Often his imagination upbuilt that glorious city of gold, with its twelve gates, each one pearl, and its clear river flowing from the great white throne, and its mystic atmosphere of peace and joy.

As to-night he mooned along, dreaming of anything but words of three syllables, a shout aroused him to reality. It was the voice of his cousin Charles, a youngster about a year his junior.

"Hullo, Steve! Where are you going? Supper's ready. Aunt Harriet's been looking for you everywhere."

"All right," said Stephen wearily. "I'm coming."

"She isn't in a temper, I don't think. You'll catch it. Grandfather isn't at home."

Mr. Langton would not tolerate his daughter's scolding, so his presence was always a relief to the children.

"Where is he?" asked Stephen.

"Gone down to the Half-Moon to smoke. Aunt asked him if he'd be late, and he told her to mind her own business."

Stephen heartily wished she would.

The boys entered the parlour together. Bread and cheese and cider made up the supper, and Uncle Tom and Uncle Charles, both of whom were their father's partners, and lived on the premises, were pegging away at it. So were their wives and children. So was Aunt Harriet, looking very unamiable.

"Stephen," she said, "you *are* the most tiresome child. Why can't you come in at the right time? I've a great mind to send you to bed without supper."

"Oh, let him have something to eat and drink," said Uncle Tom, who was the genial uncle.

"Better give him a good horse-whipping," said Uncle Charles, who was the fierce uncle, and flogged his own children unmercifully.

"He's a dreadfully troublesome boy," said the oracular voice from the side-table.

"Come and sit by me, Steve," said his black-eyed and black-haired cousin Mary, a pretty little girl of eight.

Stephen accepted the invitation, and was suffered to eat his supper in peace.

By nine o'clock the children had gone to bed, and their mothers

to look after them; the old grandmother had also retired. The two uncles and the maiden aunt were holding half-whispered converse, the men being supplied with long pipes and hot brandy and water.

"That boy, Stephen, must be sent to boarding-school," said Aunt Harriet. "He's very much in the way at home, and he ought to be learning something."

"So he ought," said Uncle Tom; "but then it'll cost so much."

"Not above twenty pounds a year," said Aunt Harriet. "And he must be brought up to be a clerk or something. He'll never make a tanner."

"I don't mean that he shall," said Uncle Charles.

"Why not?" asked his brother.

"Why not? As if there weren't enough besides him to make tanners of! D'ye think that tanyard 'ill keep a regiment of Langtons?"

"That's true," said Tom, whose intellect moved more slowly than his brother's. "Well, where had he better go?"

"I've thought about that," said the aunt. "You know Parson Sadbrooke, that was drowned bathing. Well, his school at Kingsleat is going on. I saw Amelia Sadbrooke at market to-day, and she said her mamma, as she calls her, the affected thing, had hired another young parson to teach the school."

"But why should we, who are Dissenters, send the boy to a Church school?" asked Uncle Tom.

"Oh, he's very young yet," said Miss Langton.

"It can't matter much for the present, and Amelia says they're going to be very cheap."

"What's the parson's name?" asked Uncle Charles.

"She did tell me, but I forget—something like Verily; for I thought of 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee.' But he's a very clever young man."

"Is he?" said Charles Langton. "Well, I hope he'll make the young scamp of some use. I suppose father won't object."

"Not he," said Harriet. "I'll ask him about it to-night, if he's not very late."

Presently the men also went off to bed, and Miss Harriet sat alone, reading a battered copy of Baxter's "Saint's Rest." The Langtons of this generation were very religious. The family had a curious habit of being very wild in one generation, and very tame in the next. Its present head bore the reputation of being the most thorough reprobate the Langtons had ever had amongst them; women and wine, horse-racing and cock-fighting, had impoverished without taming him; at sixty-five he was just as reckless as ever, and his mad orgies and desperate deeds were proverbial. So his sons and daughters had all shown exemplary piety, externally at least: he being a regular church-goer, they had unanimously deserted to a peculiarly rabid conventicle, and their Calvinism was of the most rigorous type, and their idea of

the future world for all who differed from them the hottest possible. It might be predicted that their children would relapse into the old gentleman's ways.

Aunt Harriet waited about an hour for her father. He came at last, earlier than usual, bringing in with him a strong smell of tan and tobacco. He was about five feet nine inches high, very broad in the shoulders, very deep in the chest, with arms and thighs and calves of muscular proportions. He wore an old-fashioned deep-pocketed blue coat with brass buttons, but almost all the rest of his costume was leather. The long waistcoat was leather, tanned with the hair on it; he wore leather breeches and top-boots. He came in, riding-whip in hand, flung himself heavily into a great leather chair which he always occupied, and exclaimed—

"You up, Harry? Then get me some hot brandy and water, and be quick about it."

"The kitchen fire is out, I expect, father."

"The kitchen fire be d——d. Light it again, if that's all. What good are you?"

Mr. Langton's frequent oaths may as well be imagined in his future conversations. There is this to be said for him, that he always apologised if he happened to swear in the presence of a clergyman.

His daughter soon returned with the brandy and water.

"A nice Christian young woman you are for an excuse," said old Langton, to whom his children's devotion to Dissent was supremely ridiculous. "Does your snivelling parson teach you to tell lies to your father? It used to be 'Honour your father and mother' when I was a boy."

"I was afraid the fire would be out, really, father."

"Were you? More likely afraid I should drink too much brandy. Children would like to keep their fathers in order now-a-days. Can't do it with *me* though, can you, Miss Harriet? And, now I think of it, what are you stopping up so late for to-night? Little girls like you ought to be in bed. Come, what is it?"

"Nothing, father, nothing at all. I was reading."

The truth is that, finding her father unusually cantankerous, she was afraid to enter on the question of Stephen's going to school, lest he should decide against it from sheer caprice. But she could not quiet the old gentleman.

"Reading, miss? eh? No, no, that won't do. You haven't been seeing a sweetheart, have you? No, you're too old for that, I'm afraid. Perhaps there is one too—men are such asses; come, where is he? In the clock?"

"Well, father, if you must know," she said, "I wanted to have a word with you about Stephen's going to school."

"Upon my life!" exclaimed Mr. Langton, bursting into a roar of laughter, "this *is* good. Oh, I like you canting people.

Why, that's the second lie you've told me within ten minutes, and all for no purpose in the world. I've a great mind to send for that parson of yours to-morrow, and tell him the whole story, and give you a precious good tanning before his face. I WILL, BY JINGO!"

He slapped his mighty fist upon the oak table, and lay back in his great black chair laughing a Titanic laugh. But it was no joke to Aunt Harriet. If little Stephen had seen her, he would have felt that he was avenged.

"Don't, father, don't!" she cried, bursting into tears, and throwing herself at his feet in an agony of terror; for the vehement old man's caprices were uncontrollable by public opinion, and he was quite as capable of castigating his daughter as if she had been a quarter of a centuf'y younger than she was. So she was in mortal fear, and could say nothing but—"Don't, father, don't; I'll never do it again"—just as if she had changed places with her little niece Mary.

But the old man had laughed himself into a better temper.

"Never mind, Harry, I'll let you off this time. And now hold your blubbering and tell me what's all this about Steve."

"We all think he ought to go to a good school, father. He's getting a big boy, and he's learning nothing."

"Well, isn't Charley getting a big boy too?"

"Charles isn't as quick as Stephen," she said.

"That's true," he said emphatically. "Charley 'll be just such another fool as his father. Well, where d'ye mean to send the lad?"

"To Mrs. Sadbrooke's, at Kingsleat. She's going to keep on the school."

"Oh, you've had sense enough to choose a Church school, have you? Well, he may go as soon as you like. When does the school open?"

"This day week, father."

"Very well; Tom can drive him over. He needn't go to Miss Martin's again. Now get me some more brandy and water, and be off to bed."

Aunt Harriet obeyed orders this time with exemplary promptitude. When she got up to her room she almost fainted; she had obtained what she wanted, but she had been thoroughly frightened. And, with strange mental obliquity, she blamed her poor little nephew for her sufferings.

"He'll have a week's holiday, the little brat," she thought to herself; "and I can't have him to lessons, he's so terribly troublesome and fidgety. Well, I'll write and ask Mrs. Sadbrooke to call, and I'll tell her he must be kept strict, and well punished when he does anything wrong. The way that boy comes into the parlour without wiping his shoes shows he's got an unregenerate heart. I hope that young parson—Verily, or what his name is—will give it him well."

Thus amiably meditated Miss Harriet while she unlaced her stays; and when she got to bed she found sleep impossible, and, if she fell into a half doze, had horrid dreams of the minister and deacons of Bethesda Chapel in full assembly, and her father, horsewhip in hand, ready to give her the threatened "tanning."

Meanwhile Stephen, sound asleep by his cousin Charles, was in Fairyland, and the Queen of the Fairies had a pretty infantile face, with tender brown eyes, and a little pouting rosebud of a mouth, and glossy curls of chestnut hair—a face of which he dreamed by day and night. And in the morning Stephen had his pleasantest time: for a clangorous bell always awoke him at six, when it called the men to work in the tanyard; and he had a delightful hour of morning dreams, in which will and fancy united to produce visions most exquisite; and when dressed, if he went to the great window on the staircase, he could see at a window the very face of his dreams, fresh and rosy from its morning bath, and a plump dimpled hand was kissed to him. All this took place in its usual order on the following morning; and Stephen came down to breakfast as joyous as a young lark, eager for *Gesang und Luft.* Even his aunt's acidulated countenance did not make him uncomfortable.

Old Mr. Langton seldom breakfasted with his family. He had a large back parlour, looking out upon the courtyard, whence he could watch the traffic to and from the tanyard. On a sideboard in this room he always kept a round of salt beef, and immediately below a barrel of home-brewed ale; and at about six o'clock, after two or three slices of the beef and about a quart of the beer, the old tanner went forth to his day's work. He thoroughly knew his business. He was the best tanner in the county, and the Langton butts were famous in those days when leather lasted longer than most things. He kept everybody hard at work, his two sons not excepted. The worst of it was that he spent his money faster than he made it.

In the midst of breakfast on the present occasion, however, the old gentleman strode in, sat down in his great chair, and said to Mary Langton, Uncle Tom's daughter—

"Polly, draw me a mug of ale."

Mary was his favourite child; a sweet little creature, whose perfect temper and wondrous docility made sage gossips remark that she was too good to live. She went for the ale, while Aunt Harriet looked on in some anxiety, remembering the scene of the previous evening. The thirsty old tanner poured the contents of the tankard down his throat, and then said—

"What day is Steve to go to school, Harry?"

"Next Thursday, father."

Stephen's blue wondering eyes were very wide open.

"All right: I'll drive him over; I want to go to Kingsleat. What do you think I heard last night at the Half-Moon, Tom?"

"Good news, I hope?" said his son.

"Not particularly good, nor yet bad either. Devil Branscombe's back at Kingsleat."

"Not living at the house?" said Tom.

"Nothing could live there but a rat," said his father. "No, he's taken the old place at the top of the street."

"What can he want down here?" asked Charles.

"I don't think he's likely to tell you, or me either," said his father. "But I shall like to see the Squire; so I mean to drive Steve over to Widow Sadbrooke's, where he's going to school. I suppose *you've* no objection, Harriet?"

Stephen seldom listened to anything anybody said, being occupied with his own dreams; but now he had been wide awake, drinking in the amazing news. He wasn't at all sorry to go to school, but for two things. He couldn't expect to meet his father at Kingsleat, and he should never see—*her*. Like most precocious boys, he felt indistinctly conscious that his intellect required guidance which it did not receive. And the atmosphere of his grandfather's house oppressed him, and Aunt Harriet tortured him. Still, to his temperament, in every day there were long hours of happiness. And he was haunted by one vision from which he must be entirely severed.

Breakfast over, Aunt Harriet summoned all the children to a room upstairs, where she acted as schoolmistress. She called Stephen to come also, but her father said—

"Let the boy run about these few days. He don't want *your* lessons now."

So she gathered her little tribe, who sat upright and unhappy round a long table, at the head of which Miss Harriet herself took up an imposing position. A portentous pile of books was before her, and close to her hand lay a rod ravished from the branches of that most beautiful silver-rinded tree, whose pendulous boughs the poet loves to see kissing the stream. It had been well used, that rod, and found farther use this morning. Poor little Mary, whom no human being had ever equitably accused of doing wrong, was the chief victim; what schoolmaster or mistress ever found any difficulty in discovering faults worthy of punishment in children whom they wished to punish? Now Mary Langton was the only one her grandfather ever petted; whence Miss Harriet's plagose propensity. The boys whispered to each other that aunt was as cross as two sticks, and had got out on the wrong side of the bed: we, who know what that charming person had endured, have no need to form theories about the matter. 'Twas a happy moment for those young folks when, red-eyed, red-eared, hot, and stupid, and sore on various parts of their bodies, they escaped at twelve o'clock. I should like to know what will happen in the next world to those who tyrannise over children in this.

Meanwhile Stephen was having a delightful dreamy morning. Finding himself free, he went down to the cathedral, and sat in

the nave, listening to the music of the choir. Then he went away across green meadows to a weir on the Idle, where he stripped, and got under the swift fresh tumbling water, and had a most delicious douche-bath. Then he lay in the shadow of a great lime-tree on the bank, drinking in the beauty of the sunny morning, and the music of the gushing water, and dreaming of his fairy sweetheart.

Only a few months earlier, a pretty little girl, about six years old, had come to Miss Martin's academy. She was the daintiest little thing, daintily dressed. Stephen thought he had never beheld such a gem of beauty. A footman was wont to bring her in the morning and take her home when school was over; but one day the footman did not come. It was a frosty morning, and the poor fellow had slipped on a slide and sprained his ankle. The little girl set off alone; Stephen followed her a few paces off. The ground was dumb with snow; and, in a wide open space which she had to cross, the grammar school boys were making huge snowballs, and occasionally pelting the passengers. Those grammar school boys were the dread of all other young folk in Idlechester; they were athletic, audacious, heroic; they had distinguished themselves that morning by attacking the young ladies of Miss Christy's seminary, who were walking decorously three and three, and putting the governesses to flight with well-aimed snowballs, and actually kissing one or two of the prettiest girls. Stephen Langton was too sensitive and imaginative a boy to have much physical courage. His delicate nerves shrank from a black eye or a demolished nose. He was not uncommonly called a coward. Now, when the schoolboy rioters saw a pretty little girl coming, they surrounded her in an instant, and sat her upon the top of a monster snowball, about six feet high. It was a damp and chilly elevation, and she began to cry. Stephen rushed forward to interfere, and was greeted with a sharp smack in the face, and cries of "Young snob."

"If I'm a snob," he exclaimed to the boy who had struck him, "you're no gentleman, or you wouldn't behave so to a young lady."

The argument, strange to say, found a hearing; the child was liberated, and Stephen had the pleasure of bringing her safely to her father's house. It was the large house exactly opposite his grandfather's; but a house of quite a different character. No business ever intruded there. A small lawn divided it from the street. Stephen would have left his charge at the front door, but the young lady would not let him. "Come in and see papa," she said; and in a few moments he was sitting in a superb library by a noble fire, with a slice of marvellous cake in his hand, and a glass of some strange nectar by his side. And the young lady of six, who melted off the snow from her silk frock, and watched him eat, was no other than our heroine—

"Sweet Anne Page."

CHAPTER II.

MR. PAGE THE BOTANIST.

ANNE'S father sat by the fire also. A slender man, of middle height, a thoroughbred gentleman, with abundance of crisp curly hair, as white as the snow which lay in the streets. His countenance was mild and calm, his profile pure Greek, his hands were transparently white, with long slender filbert-nailed fingers, which seemed intended to do some work of extreme delicacy and difficulty, and indeed such was their occupation. Mr. Page, a man of large fortune, devoted himself entirely to the study of botany, and was one of the greatest authorities in the science. He did not, however, adhere entirely to the *hortus siccus* department; he had in his beautiful gardens—the wonder of Idlechester—a unique collection of foreign and unusual plants, and his conservatories were unequalled by any private gentleman in England. A pleasant odour of exotic flowers strove for the mastery with the fragrance of Russia bindings in this library.

The signs of opulence and taste in the room struck Stephen's sensitive fancy with delight. The boy had never seen so many books, such beautiful pictures, such graceful plants, and gorgeous blossoms. The silver salvers and richly-cut decanters amazed him; so did the luscious cakes and rare wines. To Stephen this was Fairyland, and sweet Anne Page its proper queen. From that time he dreamt of her night and day. She was the lady of his visions.

Mr. Page was very kind to him, and thanked him for taking care of Anne, and told him that he had known his mother very well (which he had to his cost), and asked him to come and see him when he pleased. And Stephen and the little girl struck up an immediate friendship. She showed him all her dearest toys. So, in the course of time, it became an understood thing that the footman need not fetch Anne from Miss Martin's—Stephen would take care of her. And he used to bring her home regularly, and often go in with her, and on half-holidays loiter with her through the paths of Mr. Page's gardens, wondering always at the strange beauty of the tropical plants in his conservatories, of the foreign birds in his aviaries.

Stephen left the banks of the Idle that morning in good time to fetch his young mistress at twelve from Miss Martin's, and as they came homewards he told her the news.

"O Stephen!" she said, "you mustn't go. What can I do without you?"

"I am afraid I must," he said sadly.

"Well, I shall ask papa," she answered, being at the age when childhood believes in papa's omnipotence.

Mr. Page, of course, told his young friend that going to school was the very best thing for him, and then sent him over to ask his Aunt Harriet to let him stay and dine. That amiable lady snarled something about Anne Page being "a pert little hussy," but gave permission. And for the brief, the too brief week which intervened, Stephen and Anne had plenty of pleasant play in Mr. Page's glorious gardens. It was an Elysian period to the visionary boy.

Years before, Mr. Page had very deeply loved a little blue-eyed fair-haired flirt called Amy Wexford. Keen-sighted in most matters, he did not perceive how foolish a creature he had taken to his heart. He told his love, and she accepted him: she was not the girl to refuse some thousands a year, though she privately remarked to her gossiping acquaintance that he was old enough to be her father—he was about ten years her senior. Though engaged to him, she reserved the right of flirtation, and was abetted therein by young Langton, who didn't mean marriage, but who liked flirting with a pretty girl when it was not very dangerous. Now the contrast between Mr. Page and young Langton was a very strong one. First of all, Langton was about Amy's own age. And then Mr. Page was a courteous and ceremonious wooer; his love was mixed with reverence; he treated this commonplace little biped in petticoats as if she were Spenser's Una or Shakespeare's Miranda; he kissed her hand much oftener than her lips. Langton was of quite another sort. He pulled her about and romped with her to her heart's content. He met her by moonlight alone, and walked with his arm round her waist, and lifted her over stiles like a baby, and kissed her at every pause in the conversation. So, fully intending to marry Mr. Page, Amy Wexford took every opportunity of flirting with Langton.

Now it chanced that there was a Christmas party at Mrs. Wexford's, and of course there was abundant mistletoe. The scene was rather trying to Mr. Page's sensitive delicacy. Girl after girl was seized and kissed so thoroughly that he felt disgusted; especially disgusted when Amy, whose pretty lips he touched as if he feared to take away their bloom, submitted to as much osculation as anybody would give her.

"Now, another kiss, Miss Amy," said Langton with a hoarse laugh. "Here's a sly bit of mistletoe."

And he caught the unreluctant maiden in his arms, and operated as if he were washing her face.

"You take great liberties, Mr. Langton," said Mr. Page sternly.

"Do I? That's Miss Amy's affair. Isn't it, Amy?"

"Of course," she said. "Why, it would be ridiculous not to have some fun at Christmas time."

"I think you have had too much of that sort of fun," said Mr. Page.

"Law, do you?" said Langton. "Why, Amy would give me

a kiss any time without your leave, I know. Wouldn't you, Amy?"

"Of course I would," she said, and turned up her mouth for a kiss with perfect readiness.

Mr. Page's eyes were opened. Love had blinded him, but now he saw clearly.

"That is quite enough," he said. "I wish you good-bye, Miss Wexford."

He had loved her a myriad times better than she deserved, and it was well for him that he discovered her character in time. She, disappointed at the loss of fortune and position, took possession of the tanner's son, whom she did not suffer to escape from her entanglements. She was dead now; and Mr. Page thought with some slight tenderness of her blue eyes and bright hair, which were reproduced in her son. And thus it was that he took a fancy to Stephen Langton.

The children had a happy week. They played at wooing very prettily.

"I like you, Stephen," dainty little Anne would say.

"And I love you, Anne—oh! *so* much."

"Well, if you love me, tell me a story."

Stephen was great at telling stories. They were a queer mixture of Milton and Bunyan, the tanyard and the cathedral. The children were sitting on a grassy mound, under a great acacia, whose pendent masses of bloom were musical with bees. Opposite was an oval grass-plot, as smooth as a billiard-table, with a fountain in the centre playing upon a graceful fernery. In the clear basin shoals of gold fish darted to and fro, while some white doves drank at its marble verge, looking as if they too were marble, and cooed melodiously.

"If you love me, tell me a story, Stephen."

Was ever such request, so made, refused? Ah me! to have the gift of poetry, and sit in summer with the girl you love, and murmur some sweet passionate tale, and see its sadness moisten her delicious eyes! What can be pleasanter—except perhaps an anchovy toast, and a bottle of good port, and a gossip with an old crony over your cavendish?

"Once upon a time," said Stephen, "there was a fallen angel who got tired of the place where he was."

"But what's a fallen angel, Stephen? And where was he?"

"You mustn't interrupt," said he gravely; whereon the little maiden pressed her lips very close together, and looked demure.

"So," he continued, "he got a suit of clothes made that would hide his wings, and came and opened a large shop in High Street."

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Anne, "how strange!"

"And the shop," proceeded the young dissour, "was full of the most delightful things, different from anything that anybody else sold. And the bishop came, and he sold him a strong scent

that kept him from falling asleep in service. And the bishop's wife came, and he sold her a fan all diamonds, and the feathers of beautiful birds, that fanned her without her moving it. And the dean came, and he sold him a machine that made the most beautiful sermons you ever heard, and he had nothing to do but read them. And the precentor came, and he sold him a most beautiful voice that sang in the psalms like an angel. And an ugly cross woman came, and he sold her something to wash her face with every morning, and it made her quite pretty, and young, and good-tempered, and she got a husband. And a gentleman fond of hunting came, and he sold him a horse that would jump over every wall, or hedge, or river, and never got tired. And the prettiest little girl in Idlechester came, and he sold her a doll that hugged her round the neck, and kissed her, and called her *mamma*, and spoke nicely when it was spoken to."

"O Stephen!" said the little listener, "how very, very charming!"

"And a little boy who was going to school came, and he sold him a looking-glass in which he could see what his sweetheart was doing whenever he looked at it."

"Oh! what a nice story!" exclaimed Anne. "Is it *all* true?"

"Wait," said Stephen, "there's a great deal more. By and by the people who bought all these nice things got so pleased with them that they forgot everything else, and didn't attend to their business, and didn't even go to church regularly."

Stephen, it may be observed, was a Churchman by instinct, and never went near Bethesda, except when compelled by Aunt Harriet. He used to walk off to church close after his grandfather, so that his persecutor did not dare to speak. And he spent many a dreamy hour in the cathedral.

"So," he continued, "the city got to be very wicked. And late on Christmas Eve, when the angels that watch over cities come down to see that there is nothing wicked about on Christmas Day, two of them were going down High Street."

"O Stephen! are there angels to look after all cities?"

"Yes," said the boy, "and people too. You've got one to take care of you, I'm sure, Anne."

"Have you ever seen any of them?" she asked with curious awe.

"I think I have," said the boy slowly. "I am almost sure I have."

"O Stephen! I should be so frightened." And the child hid her face on his breast.

"They wouldn't hurt you, dear. But let me go on. Two angels were walking down High Street, and through the shutters of the bad angel's shop they saw a light. And they peeped in, and there he was, making more things to sell. So they knocked

at the door, and he came out with a candle in his hand, and one of them, called Ithuriel, just touched him with a long sharp spear he carried, and he turned black and ugly all over, and he and his shop went off with a tremendous bang that woke all the people. And in the morning they found that all the things he had sold them had disappeared."

"What a dreadful story, Stephen! I don't like the end. I liked the first part. Why don't the good angels come and set up shops?"

Holiday prattle of childhood, so silly and so sweet! Oh! that the Chronicler of Clovernook had dreamt the truth, and that we could walk back through the weary paths of the years into the charmed region of infancy!

Stephen's happy week came to an end too soon. On Sunday he was allowed to go to church with Mr. Page and his little daughter, and to dine with them afterwards. By the time the last day had arrived, he had almost forgotten Aunt Harriet, whom he saw only at breakfast, and in the evening. But the last day *did* come, and at night he took leave of his friends. Little Anne had a prayer-book to give him.

"I asked papa," she said, "to buy me a magic looking-glass, but he couldn't get one."

Although Stephen had forgotten Aunt Harriet, the lapse of memory had not been reciprocal. She did not like to offend Mr. Page, for she knew her father wished to be on good terms with an influential neighbour; but she sorely grudged her nephew his holiday. And she did not forget to invite Mrs. Sadbrooke and her daughter Amelia to tea, at which meal the iniquities of the younger generation were solemnly discussed. Aunt Harriet was charmed to find that Mr. Vellelly (verily that was his name) was highly recommended as a "good disciplinarian"—dreadful words!—and that she and her three daughters intended to maintain strict supervision over the morals, and clothing, and cleanliness of the "young gentlemen," and that there would be very few holidays, and not too much to eat. Aunt Harriet thought she had found a model school. Then Mrs. Sadbrooke communicated her delight that Mr. Vellelly was much pitted with the small-pox, and squinted abominably, so that there was little fear of either of her daughters falling in love with him; and whispered her dread that her youngest girl, Matilda Jane, a gay young thing of twenty-five, was flirting with John Daw, the junior usher, who was about eighteen, and came without any salary; and muttered under her breath a threat of awful punishments she would inflict upon Matilda Jane if there was any truth in it. She was a vixenish little woman; and she and Aunt Harriet got on as pleasantly together as a ghoul and a vampire.

"Law, mamma," said Amelia, "there's nothing in it. Matilda Jane's steady enough. She thinks Mr. Daw a mere boy."

"Boy or not, she'd better mind what she's about. I'll have no nonsense."

"I certainly wouldn't," said Aunt Harriet, with her usual amiability.

"Well, you know, mamma," said Amelia, who possibly had some slight sympathy with her sister, "Matilda Jane's of age. She can do as she likes. She's her own mistress."

"Is she, indeed?" almost screamed Mrs. Sadbrooke. "Not while she's in *my* house, I'll let her know. She may go away if she likes, the hussy; but if she stays in my house, and talks to that John Daw, I'll—well, you'll see what I'll do. You'd better tell her so; it'll be a warning to her. And don't *you* be impertinent to me, Miss Amelia, or you'll find out you're not your own missus, though you *are* thirty years old."

"I am very sorry, mamma, really," said Miss Sadbrooke.

"Oh yes! That's the way with girls now-a-days. They say something impudent to their betters, and then say they're sorry, and expect everything to be forgiven and forgotten. Why, when I was your age, I durstn't have opened my lips in such a way."

"Well, mamma, I've apologised; what more can I do? You needn't go on all the afternoon."

"You hear that, Miss Langton. She's apologised, and I needn't go on. No, Miss Amelia, you needn't trouble yourself to apologise, as you call it, any more. I'll not forgive you, depend upon it. You and I will have a word or two together when we get home. I don't allow myself to be insulted, I assure you, Miss Harriet."

"I think you are quite right," said Miss Langton, while Amelia Sadbrooke, who had risen from her chair, had turned to the window. Few people would have cared to hear the squabble between mother and daughter, but Aunt Harriet thoroughly enjoyed it, and mischievously speculated on the pains and penalties awaiting the delinquent. It was not with any special anxiety for mitigation that, as the ladies went to dress, she whispered to Mrs. Sadbrooke—

"Don't be too hard on poor Amelia."

"Oh no," replied that lady, in a tone and with a compression of the lips that spoke volumes.

"*She'll* keep Master Stephen in order," said Aunt Harriet to herself when they were gone.

Meanwhile he, anticipating no ill, was in the Elysium of a tranquil summer garden, telling dreamy stories to Sweet Anne Page.

CHAPTER III.

THE BRANSCOMBES AT BREAKFAST.

OLD Mr. Langton drove a fast-trotting mare, which did the eight miles from Idlechester to Kingsleat in fewer minutes than any other horse in the county could have done it. But Mrs. Sadbrooke's establishment was on a byroad, about a mile and a half out of the way. The tanner decided to go to Kingsleat first, wishing to catch the Squire before he left home.

It was a divine summer morning, and the freshening mist had not yet been blown from the wide meadows. Stephen, as he mounted into his grandfather's high-wheeled gig, was conscious of two faces watching him. At the parlour window of his home was Aunt Harriet, looking at him with malignant delight; while in the balcony of the first floor opposite stood his fairy princess, her curly head scarce so high as the railing, and kissed her hand to him between the bars. As the mare trotted swiftly along the beautiful road from the city to Kingsleat, it seemed to Stephen as if on his left hand a row of fiends peered at him above the hedges, while on his right a line of lovely cherubim smiled upon him with tender brown eyes.

Kingsleat, at that time a borough town returning two members to Parliament, had one long steep street, crossed about halfway down by a quaint old archway. At the bottom of the street was the sea; at its very top a large house of red brick, which Mr. Ralph Branscombe had just taken furnished. High above lay, amid the hills, the vast ruined manor-house of Branscombe, where the family had dwelt from time immemorial. Once lords of the manor, holders of all Kingsleat, and no small segment of the cathedral city, they were now comparatively poor. A good old house, the De Branscombes—a house that had given England warriors and Idlechester prelates—but too wild of blood, too fierce and restless, to succeed in quiet times. The present head of the family, who was commonly known as "Devil" Branscombe, had outdone all his predecessors. He had run away with women, and fought fatal duels, and acquired as thoroughly bad a reputation as any gentleman of good blood could desire. Commonly he lived in London, or rather in its suburbs, at a pleasant villa on the Thames, which he had craftily fortified against bailiffs; but he had just reappeared at Kingsleat, after an absence of about twenty years, bringing with him his son and his daughter, Raphael and Claudia.

Langton the tanner was one of the few tenants he had left; he had mortgaged the tanyard, but not sold it; and in his riotous youth, when Kingsleat and Idlechester had rung with his wild

exploits, Langton, though a good many years older, had been his constant associate. So, when he heard that the Squire was at Kingsleat, the tanner decided to pay him an early visit; and his mare brought him and his grandson to the house just as the Branscombes were sitting down to breakfast.

They were a remarkable group. Ralph Branscombe was more than six feet high, with abundance of crisp iron-grey hair, and a flowing beard and mighty moustache of the same colour. His eyes were dark and deep-set, his nose like a hawk's beak, his complexion bronzed by years of outdoor exercise. He looked just what he was, an awkward customer, a man who knew a thing or two.

Raphael Branscombe, a young man of about three and twenty, was a marvellous contrast to his father. Guido could scarcely have done justice to his angelic beauty. His long fair hair was parted in the middle; his languid dreamy gaze seemed to betoken a poetic nature;

"As smooth as Hebe's his unrazored lips."

He was below the middle height, and his figure was exquisitely graceful. Yet this youth was an unequalled proficient at athletic sports. That he could dance delightfully any one could see; many a girl had thought it the most delicious moment of her life when he whirled her wildly in a waltz. Angelo had among his pupils no eye so quick, no wrist so lithe with the rapier. He was a dead shot with the pistol, a daring rider across country, a magnificent billiard and card player. Somebody had called Raphael Branscombe "the Seraph," and the name stuck to him.

He was a thorough Sybarite. His attendant, Louis, who accompanied him everywhere, had surrounded him with materials for breakfast. Claret jug and coffee pot were close at hand; a chicken capitally grilled had been set before him; sardines, eggs, *pâté de foie gras*, were picturesquely grouped around him. As he lounged lazily in his gorgeous dressing-gown, you would not have suspected the latent energy of his character.

What a delicious accompaniment to the breakfast table is a pretty girl, fresh and fragrant from her matutine bath, dressed in some cool pure print or muslin! Claudia Branscombe was far more than a pretty girl, she was a vision of wondrous beauty. Not quite eighteen, she had yet developed the full ripeness of womanhood. Her abundant black hair—as she looked at herself in her morning mirror—fell upon shoulders of marble whiteness, yet with a rosy flush, of form most perfect. Idalian Aphrodite had not a fairer bosom, nor did her cestus encircle a sweeter waist. Claudia's was that rare complexion which lets one see the life through the flesh. Her black eyes fringed by long dense lashes, varied endlessly; they could be sad, or fierce, or joyous, or filled with an ineffable longing for love. Her

bewitching little mouth could be imperious, or persuasive, or a thousand other things; in repose it looked simply kissable. She had not yet acquired the soubriquet of "the Panther," by which she was afterwards known.

Though Ralph Branscombe of that ilk was a poor man, he always lived like a prince. A groom sprang to the head of Langton's mare; a footman in livery gave him admission.

"Show him in here," said Ralph, hearing who it was; so the tanner and his grandson entered the breakfast room.

"Ha, Langton," said Ralph, "I'm glad you've not forgotten me. These are my son and daughter, babies when you and I met last. And that's a son of yours, I suppose."

"A grandson, Squire," said the tanner. "I'm taking him to school."

"Let me give you some breakfast, Mr. Langton," said Claudia.

"I don't fancy you'll persuade my old friend to eat our sort of breakfast," said Ralph. "John, bring a tankard of ale."

The tanner might have echoed the song of the thirsty member of Parliament—

> "You may talk about measures of every sort;
> The best measure of all is a silver quart."

The foaming fluid descended into his chasm-like throat with marvellous speed.

"I only just dropped in to pay my respects, Squire," he said. "If I can do anything for you I shall be very glad."

"I know you will," said Ralph, "for the sake of old times. And if I want anything I'll ride over and see you. We shall be here till August, when my son and I are going to the moors, but I think my daughter will stay on."

"Won't the young lady find it dull, all alone?" asked Langton —"Kingsleat's a slow place."

"It is not lively," said the Squire. "But she'll get some society at her uncle's."

"Well, his reverence isn't very gay; and as for Miss Winifred, folks say she's a regular saint."

"And you don't think saints amusing, eh?" laughed the Squire. "Well, no more do I. What do you think of the prospect, Claudia?"

"I shall manage, papa. Where does this nice little boy go to school, Mr. Langton? At the Grammar School?"

"No, miss, to a parson's widow's, Mrs. Sadbrooke's, a mile and a half out of town."

"How charming! I shall drive over and see him. May I have him here for a holiday, Mr. Langton?"

"Oh yes, miss, whenever you like. I'll tell Mrs. Sadbrooke."

Langton, who had years before followed his young landlord as faithfully as a feudal retainer, did not dream of refusing any-

thing to a daughter of the house. It may be imagined that Aunt Harriet's temper was not improved when she heard of the arrangement.

Claudia had taken quite a fancy to the boy. She made him sit on a stool by her side, and gave him a hothouse peach, and smoothed his fair hair gently with her soft white hand. And when he went away with his grandfather, she gave him a kiss, and slipped a half-sovereign into his waistcoat pocket, and told him she would be sure to come and see him. Here was something fresh for Stephen to dream of.

Again the mare started at her long easy trot for Mrs. Sadbrooke's. As he drove along, old Langton was muttering to himself. "Well," he thought, "the Squire hasn't changed much. He looks as well as ever, and he's as wild as ever, I bet. And that daughter of his, isn't she a beauty? What a flash in her eye, too! It'll take a *man*, and no mistake, to tame *her*. And as sweet a temper, to look at, as you'd wish; not like Harriet, now, as cross as two sticks, and as cowardly as a cur. I wonder what that Miss Branscombe would say to anybody who told her he'd give her a tanning!" Here the old man broke into a loud laugh, rather astonishing both the mare and his grandson. "As for that boy, or young man, I can't make him out. He don't look like a Branscombe. He's as handsome as a girl. By Jingo!" he exclaimed aloud, "I believe I've guessed it. He *is* a girl in man's clothes, and the Squire's up to some devilry." And struck by the magnitude of his supposed discovery, the old man relapsed into silent thought.

Soon the gig entered the gates of Mrs. Sadbrooke's establishment. It was a long low house, pleasantly situate among meadows. Three or four boys, early comers, were lounging about the playground, not having as yet summoned energy enough to find themselves any occupation. Mr. Langton and his grandson were shown into a stiff parlour, thoroughly scholastic in its arrangements, where the widow and her three daughters sat in silk dresses and with smiling faces to receive them. Little Stephen, if he had ever read of an ogre's den, would have recognised the ogresses at once. But who, under that lavish amiability of exterior, would have guessed at the widow's threats to her eldest offspring? Who would have thought that Amelia, and Arabella, and Matilda Jane were all in mortal terror of their mother? The three sisters were very much alike; but Arabella, the middle one, was the roundest. She had a round head, set upon a round bust, which again surmounted a round mass of petticoat. How much of this sphericity was natural, and how much artificial, none but her own family knew.

The greetings over, and the fortunate pupil introduced, cake and wine were brought in and Mr. Vellelly sent for. Seedcake and a whitey-brown fluid representing sherry were hardly to Mr Langton's taste, so he remarked that he generally drank ale.

"Oh, we have some excellent ale," said Matilda Jane, the liveliest of the family, and forthwith jumped up to fetch it herself.

The unlucky tanner took a good draught of it without much consideration, and then made a face which plainly expressed his feelings.

"Good day, Mrs. Sadbrooke," he said, rising from his chair at once. "I'm very busy, and can't stay to see Mr. What-d'ye-call-him. Oh, by the way, if Miss Branscombe of Kingsleat wants Steve for a holiday she's to have him whenever she likes—mind that."

He was gone before the ladies could remonstrate against a request so subversive of discipline. He drove his mare at her fastest trot straight to the Half Moon at Idlechester, where he drank three or four tumblers of hot brandy and water at a rapid rate, "to save myself from being poisoned," as he told the landlord, Winslow.

"I thought that wash had given me the cholera; I did indeed."

When Mr. Vellelly arrived, too late to see the impetuous old tanner, Mrs. Sadbrooke was down upon him pretty sharply.

"Really, Mr. Vellelly, I think you might be ready to see the parents of pupils when they call. It is a part of the duty that I pay you for."

"Perhaps he stopped to titivate himself," giggled Matilda Jane.

"That will do, miss," said her mother sternly. "Now, Mr. Vellelly, take this young gentleman to the schoolroom, and please to keep ready in future to come when you're sent for."

Whereupon *exeunt* master and pupil.

"That young man isn't active enough for the place," said the widow. "I can see I shall have a deal of trouble with him. He wants waking up."

"He's a great stupid," said Matilda Jane.

"Perhaps you'll not be quite so quick in making remarks," said the widow to her youngest daughter. "I don't allow interference, you know."

Soon after the ladies dispersed.

"There won't be any more boys to-day," said Mrs. Sadbrooke, "so I may as well look after their linen. You come and help me, Arabella. And you two girls know what you've got to do."

Matilda Jane did, at any rate. Watching an opportunity, she slipped away from her elder sister to an orchard at one side of the house, on which no windows looked out. Here she found, quite by accident, Mr. John Daw, who, strange to say, embraced her, and called her his darling.

"Hush, John," she said; "don't talk loud. If mamma should find it out I don't know what would happen."

Miss Matilda Jane, in her eagerness to meet Mr. John Daw, had forgotten a certain aperture in the house. It was not a window, but a square wired opening into a pantry, half under-

ground. Amelia, suspicious of her sister, had concealed herself in this pantry, and could see and hear the lovers with facility. Having satisfied herself, she quietly slipped round into the orchard, and caught them in a tender moment. Mr. Daw, I regret to say, ran away instantly.

"Well, upon my word, miss, this is nice behaviour. And after I told ma there was nothing in it; and ma slapped me for taking your part. Well, I shall go and tell her at once."

Amelia didn't mean it, but the instinct of tyranny was strong in her, and she wanted to get her sister under her thumb.

"Oh, don't, Meely, was the reply. "I d do as much for you any day. Now, don't be cruel."

"Well, I think you're a stupid thing to care about that Daw. But you go and mend all the stockings directly, and if you do plenty of work I mayn't tell ma at present. You know what you'll get if I do."

"I'll run away from home, I declare I will," sobbed the unhappy Matilda Jane. "I won't stay at home and do all your work because of being afraid you'll tell."

"Run away, you great goose, without a sixpence, I suppose! You go and do what I tell you, or else I declare I'll call ma at once."

Whereupon the luckless young lady wiped her eyes and betook herself to a long day's stocking mending.

When the tanner and his grandson had left the Branscombes' breakfast room, the Seraph gave a sigh of relief, and said—

"Upon my life, that old gentleman's loud voice is fatiguing. Louis, bring me some hock and seltzer, and mind it's iced."

"He's a fine old boy," said the Squire. "I've found his strong arms useful before now."

"Yes," said Raphael, "he'd make his way in a row. But, Claudia, what do you mean by getting up a flirtation with that blue-eyed child? He's much too young for you."

"I like that boy's face," she said. "He's a dreamy poetic child. I shall pet him, when I find it dull here. And now, Raphael, go on with your breakfast; you seem too lazy to eat."

"I am. I shall smoke. Leave me alone, Claudia, that's a good girl. I can't stand your oppressive endearments."

For she was standing behind his chair, and passing through his hair her fair white hands. But she lighted a cigar for him, giving it a whiff herself by way of introduction, and said—

"There. That's a beauty, Raphael."

At this point there entered two other members of the family, the Rev. Walter Branscombe, Rector of Kingsleat and Canon of Idlechester Cathedral, and his daughter Winifred.

The advowson of the living of Kingsleat, about eleven hundred a year, was still Ralph Branscombe's property. He wanted Raphael to take orders, and in time succeed his uncle, but the Seraph declined.

"No, sir," he said, "Uncle Walter's example suffices for me. I'm not a saint, and I couldn't be a hypocrite—and I'm sure I don't know which he is. I can't give up billiards and *écarté*, and one or two other things you know of. And I hate work, and talking, and poor people, and sick people, and old women. Couldn't do it, sir, for an archbishopric."

But the Rev. Walter Branscombe did it well. His prebend brought him a couple of thousand a year besides the living, and he had a fair fortune with his wife, so he was in capital condition. He lived as well as a canon and rector ought; he gave liberally to the poor; and he always had money to spare when his brother wanted a hundred or two. The head of the Branscombes gave him the living, and it was his duty to help the head of the Branscombes. He was a most eloquent, but entirely unaffected preacher; had a noble voice, and read the liturgy like a Kemble; was High Church, but not ridiculously high. He was a tall, dark, slender, thoughtful-looking man, with very black hair and inscrutable eyes. And being a widower of quite a re-marriageable age, he was naturally in favour with the ladies of Kingsleat and Idlechester.

The Seraph had nicknamed his cousin Winifred "the Saint." She was a very pretty girl indeed, looking a great deal more like Raphael's sister than Claudia did. She had been in a High Church nunnery, and liked it; had lived on bread and water, and scrubbed stone floors, and got up to sing anthems at unearthly hours, and worn sackcloth next her delicate white skin, and licked the dust at the lady superior's feet, and made liberal use of a discipline. She had dreams, by and by, of establishing a sisterhood much more rigorous than any existing—with staler bread and flatter water for food, and more floors to scrub with older brushes, and anthem-singing at unearthlier hours, and rougher sackcloth for chemises, and dirtier dust to lick, and scourges with more knots in the whipcord. Meanwhile, as the rector wanted her in his parish, she stayed at home; and very useful she was in the parish. Nobody ever district-visited, or Dorcas-meetinged, or Sunday-schooled with such enduring, never-flinching energy. She always dressed a little like a nun, but the style suited her, so Raphael declared she did it on purpose to be admired.

Father and daughter now entered together. They were warmly received. The Branscombes were one of those fine old families that always stuck together. Between Devil Branscombe and the saintly rector there might seem few points of contact; but theirs was real brotherhood nevertheless. And Raphael, under his languid *insouciance*, Claudia, amid her capricious coquetries, Winifred, with all her parochial and ecclesiastical cares, had all one first thought—the wellbeing of the Branscombes.

"Ah, Winifred, you little nun, have you got any tracts for me?" said the Seraph. "Come, give me a cousinly kiss; I know

you think it wicked, but you'll like it all the better. What a pity you've got High Church notions about cousins not marrying! Providence evidently intended you and me for one another.

"Don't tease so, Raphael," said his sister.

"Oh, the child likes to be teased, don't you, Winny?" And he drew her on his knee, and began untying her bonnet strings. "Only she always thinks it necessary to go home and do a lot of penance after. Do you wear a hair shirt now, you silly little saint?"

By this time he had removed her bonnet and demure cloak, and placed on the table a basket she carried.

"I've a great mind to box your ears, you tiresome boy," she said.

"Try, my child," said the Seraph. He held her two wrists easily in his left hand, and with his right bent down her pretty head until her lips met his. It was a charming picture, and Ralph Branscombe said—

"What a pity you can't afford to marry your cousin, Raphael!"

"She wouldn't have me, sir," he said.

Retaining his pretty prisoner, he began to ransack her basket, turning out upon the table a host of trifles, which Claudia examined and laughed at. At last they came to a stratum of letters.

"Now, Winny, I shall read your love-letters," laughed Claudia.

"No, no, no, I won't have that," she cried, vainly struggling to escape.

"Oh, but saints don't have secrets, do they, uncle?" asked Claudia.

"Certainly not," said the Seraph. "Now, Winny, I shall let Claudia read all your letters unless you give me another kiss."

Of course he received his bribe, and thus the cousins laughed and chatted, while their fathers talked seriously enough on the subject of ways and means. With their converse we have nothing to do at present. Devil Branscombe kept his head above water for a good many years to come, as readers of this novel will find.

"You're a heavy child," said the Seraph at last, springing up suddenly, and placing her on a couch.

Then he snatched up her letters from the table, and put them in his dressing-gown pocket.

"How you do worry Winifred!" said Claudia. "I wonder she ever lets you touch her."

"She can't help it," said the Seraph. "She's madly in love with me. She wouldn't be happy if I didn't touch her."

And he caught his cousin by the waist, and forced her into a wild waltz round the room.

"Do give me my letters, Raphael," she said, when it was over.

"Did you receive them all this morning, young lady?"

"Yes, I did."

"Why, there are seven of them. What a correspondence for a little girl like you! Do you tell your father confessor who writes to you, and what about?"

"Now, Raphael, don't be wicked."

"Come, confess to me. I'll give you absolution, and the penance shan't be too severe."

And he forced her to kneel to him, but did not get much confession from her. And at last she got her letters back.

When they were gone, and Ralph had left for a ride, Raphael came over to his sister's chair and looked into her beautiful black eyes.

"You've got very nice eyes, Claudia," he said, "but you don't see well."

"What! don't I see?"

"That sly little saint has got a sweetheart. Didn't you notice what a state she was in about her letters? And my uncle, wise old gentleman, doesn't know it. What fools men are when girls choose to deceive them!"

"You seem to think you see pretty clearly," said Claudia.

"I mean to look after you, my pet," he replied.

CHAPTER IV.

STEPHEN AT SCHOOL.

FROM what we have the pleasure of knowing of Mrs. Sadbrooke, it may be supposed that she kept her departed husband in excellent order. Now that he *was* departed, however, he formed a fine imaginary court of appeal; his opinion was quoted on subjects on which in his lifetime it certainly wouldn't have been asked; and when Amelia or Arabella or Matilda Jane was particularly "aggravating," and the widow had not sufficient energy to take more violent measures, she always told the delinquent to remember "her poor dear father."

That reverend gentleman had been a very obedient husband and a very bad schoolmaster. He had quaint old-fangled notions. He read long Latin prayers morning and evening, and made the boys repeat in turn long Latin graces before and after meals. He knew nothing, and taught nothing. Mr. Vellelly, having less authority, was of course rather worse. The boys' food was of good quality, but scanty. One thick round of bread and butter, and one cup of milk and water for breakfast and tea; dinner of meat and pudding, with the understanding that there

was no pudding for the boy who had two plates of meat; a little bit of bread and cheese for supper. On Saturdays bread and cheese instead of meat for dinner. The boys were not starved, but certainly under-fed; and I fancy this is the case with a very large number of middle-class schools. Our middle-class education is in a semi-barbarous state even now.

Stephen, notwithstanding his Aunt Harriet's kind intentions towards him, did not get into trouble. He had a good memory, and learned his lessons easily. He was popular among the boys, for they soon discovered his tale-telling faculty, and he spun them interminable yarns in the bedroom. He was averse to athletic sports, and used to wander about the country in dreary loneliness. The boys were not kept within bounds, but might wander where they pleased, if they were punctual at school and meals. Some of the elder ones, strong bucolic lads of sixteen or seventeen, used to follow the Duke's hounds in the hunting season, carrying poles to leap the hedges and brooks. But Stephen lived apart from all their robust fun, and dreamed his dreams, and saw weird phantoms, and told strange tales when the moonlight poured through the casements upon their little beds.

One reason why he escaped Mrs. Sadbrooke's notice was, perhaps, that she was dreadfully worried about Matilda Jane and John Daw. For that young lady had been caught more than once, and had been subjected to such indignities as her mamma could invent and apply, but all to no purpose. The widow thought of sending her usher away; but then he was very cheap; besides, he was the son of her butcher, who was very amiable in matters of credit, and whom she did not wish to offend. So an impartial historian must record that Matilda Jane's delinquencies interfered with Mrs. Sadbrooke's duty to the rest of her establishment, and that several young gentlemen escaped floggings which they would inevitably have had if her mind had been at peace. It was a remarkably mild half year.

Our poor little friend's turn came at last, and I must say he deserved it. Mr. John Daw was not popular with the boys; an usher just out of boyhood never is. Now Mr. Daw, being enamoured of Matilda Jane, gave up much time to his toilet, and used immense quantities of pomatum. Stephen's class were reading Phædrus, and they came upon the fable of "Graculus Superbus"—"The Vain Jackdaw." The pun was irresistible; Stephen wrote "Graculus Superbus" on a piece of paper, and affixed it to Mr. Daw's coat. Of course the awkward boy was caught, and the angry usher boxed his ears with fury. This, however, did not satisfy him, but he did not venture to excite general laughter by a complaint to Mr. Vellelly; so, when Stephen was writing a copy that morning, he passed behind him and jogged his elbow. A huge blot was the result. Stephen was sent up to Mr. Vellelly, and came back to his place with the dreadful words in his ears—

"You will stay down this evening."

Now flogging, as public schoolboys know, is a mere nothing, whatever it once might have been; and the pleasant author of "Etoniana" tells his stories about it as if it were quite agreeable—as a reminiscence. But middle-class schoolmasters have been in the habit of using the rod with extreme ferocity. Vellelly, however, was not one of the severer operators. Notwithstanding, little Stephen Langton, sensitive and timorous, fancied something far more dreadful than the castigations of Aunt Harriet, though that lady was in my belief worse than the schoolmaster. Moreover, there was an air of awe about it. The victims—and there were about half a dozen most days—remained below after prayers when the rest went to bed. The punishment was administered with pomp and ceremony in the presence of the whole household, a man-servant taking the part which at Eton is performed by two collegers. Stephen had heard his schoolfellows, after the infliction, creep up in the dark and go sobbing to their beds. The anticipation was too much for the imaginative child. He determined to *run away*.

It was a half holiday. All the boys would be rambling far and wide, and his absence would be unnoticed till tea was served at six o'clock. What he should gain—or lose—by running away, Stephen did not consider. Distance lent enchantment even to his Aunt Harriet at the end of the walk. So, when dinner was over, he started.

As he passed out of the playground, Hugh Thurston noticed the trouble on his countenance. Hugh was the leader of the school in everything athletic; a fine handsome boy, always ready to jump, or fight, or swim, or run, but quite devoid of scholastic tendencies. He had often protected Stephen from the bullies of the school; and, as is natural, liked him because he protected. Off on some wild holiday expedition with three or four harum-scarum followers, the fine young fellow paused at Stephen's tragic look.

"Why, Langton, what's the matter?"

"Oh," said Stephen, "I've got to be flogged this evening, and I'm afraid."

"Bah, you little blockhead, what is there to be afraid of? It's rather nice, when you're used to it. By Jove, I'd forgotten all about it, but I believe I've got to be flogged this evening, and you see how much I care. Old Vellelly can't hit hard."

And away went young Thurston with a flying leap over the nearest hedge, doubling his legs well under him, as is the wont of a born leaper. But Stephen, unconsoled, pursued his way along the lane, and emerged into the high road, and made for Idlechester at his fastest walk. He had traversed about four miles, and was walking along with eyes blind to all outward sights, and ears deaf to all outward noises, when he was suddenly arrested by a hand on his shoulder. It was Mr. Page's. That

gentleman was taking a quiet stroll, with a keen eye for anything that grew wild in the hedgerows, when he saw his young acquaintance coming headlong towards Idlechester.

"Why, Stephen, where now?" he said.

"O Mr Page!"

"Come, my little friend, tell me where you are going."

"O Mr. Page! I've *run away*."

"Have you, indeed?" he said, taking the excited child's hand. "And why have you run away?"

"Because I'm to be flogged to-night," said Stephen, "and I don't like it."

Mr. Page took the boy into a wayside inn which they had just reached, called for a glass of water, and poured into it a few drops from a stoppered phial which he took from his pocket.

"Drink that, Stephen," he said.

Stephen drank it, and was refreshed. Mr. Page then sent him away, in the care of a buxom maiden who had brought the water, to wash his face. When he returned, cool and fresh, his benefactor said—

"Well, Stephen, you don't want to be flogged, it seems?"

"No, sir—not at all."

"Most little boys have to endure it," said Mr. Page. "It isn't very unpleasant, so far as I can remember. But did you ever hear of the fish that didn't like being fried, and jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire?"

"I think I have," said Stephen.

"Well, my boy, it appears to me that's *your* case. Don't you think that if you go home to your aunt you will very likely get two whippings instead of one?"

Poor little Stephen was appalled at this view of the subject. He had not for a moment considered the kind of reception with which he was likely to meet. He remembered the hard and stinging qualities of the palm of Aunt Harriet's hand, and wondered whether the birchen rod could be more painful. And then, to endure *both!*

"You must go quietly back again," continued Mr. Page, with an amused smile. "And you must bear your punishment like a little hero. And I'll walk part of the way with you."

So, with infinite kindness, he led the young runaway back again, and took leave of him at the turning towards the school.

"You won't tell Anne about it, sir, will you?" said poor Stephen.

"I shall tell her I met you, and we had a pleasant walk together; but I shall not tell her you ran away for fear of being flogged, or else she might think you a coward. And you won't be a coward, will you, my boy?"

"No, sir," said the youngster bravely, and walked towards the school, where he arrived in good time for his bread and butter and milk and water, and ate with excellent appetite. And by-

and by came eventide, with its calm promise of refreshing rest; and the bread and cheese for supper; and the long unintelligible Latin prayers in the dimly-lighted schoolroom. And then the boys who had no punishment to endure went off to bed; and Stephen was left behind, one of four, to meet his fate. The scene would have been worthy of Rembrandt's pencil, for its effect of light and shade. The schoolroom, a later addition to the house, had many windows on three sides; and the bright moonlight so resolutely forced its entrance, that the few tallow-candles were almost useless; and the forms of the schoolmaster and usher, the schoolmistress and her daughters and servants, were dim, shapeless, indistinct. Boy after boy came up for punishment; Hugh Thurston first, taking it as a matter of course, and gathering himself up with an easy buoyancy of manner when it was over. Last of all came Stephen, who walked in a dream to the place of sacrifice. He felt himself placed in position, kneeling on a form, and leaning over a desk towards the window at the head of the schoolroom. He felt Tom, the man who blacked the boots and cleaned the knives, divest him of that portion of his apparel which interfered with the operation. He *felt*—though he could not see—Mr. Vellelly's arm rising through the air to descend upon him. But at that instant he *saw*—saw through that moonlit window on which his eyes were fixed—a dreadful apparition of a drowned man, naked, covered with river slime. And he shrieked, in a strange wild voice—

"*I see Mr. Sadbrooke's ghost!*"

The effect was terrible. The widow and her daughters screamed and fainted. Mr. Vellelly's birch did not descend according to his intention. Stephen got to bed uncastigated, and Hugh Thurston, incredulous of spectres, patted him on the back, and exclaimed—

"That *was* a clever dodge."

But Stephen, with his mind's eye, had seen that ghastly spectre, as his flushed face and straining gaze bore witness; and when, in the long narrow moonlit chamber, he told what he had seen, even brave Hugh Thurston shuddered on his bed.

The widow did not get over her shock until a hearty supper of cold roast pork had been followed by some gin and water, hot, sweet, and strong. The three young ladies looked with longing eyes on this potent and enticing but forbidden mixture: a glass of it was offered to Mr. Vellelly, but that excellent young person declined it. And there was much discussion about Stephen between them. Mrs. Sadbrooke was of opinion that the boy had seen something. Amelia reminded her mother that Miss Langton had warned them of Stephen's awful wickedness. Arabella, fat and frightened, agreed with the widow. Matilda Jane thought Stephen had done it to escape punishment, and declared he was a dear clever boy to think of such a thing. Mr. Vellelly agreed with Matilda Jane on the first point, and advised

that Stephen should be well flogged the first thing the next morning, when he could not very well pretend to see any ghosts. Finally, the matter was left unsettled.

And the next morning brought another element into the discussion, in the shape of a letter from Aunt Harriet, to say that she should come over that day to see Mrs. Sadbrooke, and inquire concerning her nephew's progress. She would be at the school at about four in the afternoon.

"How very lucky!" said the widow. "She will be just in time for tea, and we can deside what shall be done with this naughty boy."

"This naughty boy" had been remembered by one other lady. Claudia Branscombe, deserted by her father and brother, had managed to exist at Kingsleat. Not a day passed without her being seen, on horseback or in her pony carriage, moving in some direction or other. She was pretty often at Idlechester, shopping and paying visits. She had picked up a most sympathising crony there in Mrs. Bythesea, the Bishop's lady, who was only a few years her senior. She was an earl's niece, and the Bishop had married her for her beauty and her connection, when he was rector of a London parish. He was forty-two and she was seventeen at that period; they had been married seven years, but were childless; and she was a latitudinarian in her habits as he in his theology. She was a pretty vivacious little thing, with abundant auburn tresses, which escaped in picturesque profusion from beneath her jaunty straw hat; and she contrasted well with the darker, deeper-bosomed, more passionate beauty of Claudia Branscombe, as the latter young lady drove a pair of frisky chestnut ponies through the streets of Idlechester.

Claudia, eager for a new sensation, had set up a tandem cart fit for Lilliput, and had gradually got the frisky chestnuts into the way of it. And on the very morning after Stephen's spectral adventure, she had for the first time ventured to take it over to Idlechester. She drove down first to the Rectory, and tried to induce Winifred to go with her, but that saintly little personage was far too timorous. So away she tooled by herself, with only a Lilliputian groom behind, and took the chestnuts through the High Street in gallant style, and drove on to where the Bishop's Palace stands greenly niched in a silvan bend of the river Idle. Old Langton, the tanner, standing on the steps of the Half-Moon, said to the landlord—

"There, you'd know that was a Branscombe."

She pulled up at the palace portico. Her boy-groom went to the leader's head, and she sprang to the gravel. The Bishop's wife came flying out to see the new equipage, of which there had been much talk already.

"Now, Cecilia," said Miss Branscombe, "I am going to take you back to dine with me. It's no good to refuse; run and get ready."

"What *will* the Bishop say?"

"Never mind the Bishop. We'll take him by storm." And she hurried Mrs. Bythesea upstairs to dress—which done, they both descended to the *sancti sanctum episcopi.*

The Bishop, a thorough ladies' prelate, delightedly welcomed his wife and her beautiful companion. He paternally patted Cecilia's cheek, and pressed a paternal kiss (he was obliged to stand on tiptoe to do it) on Claudia's calm white forehead. He had just been horribly pestered by a Low Church vicar, who wanted him to prosecute Archdeacon Coningsby for heresy. The contrast was a prodigious relief. The Bishop positively purred.

"I am going to take Cecilia home to dinner," said Claudia; "very likely she'll stay the night. May she go? Be quick and say yes, my dear Bishop, my ponies are getting restless."

"You are spoilt children," said the Bishop. "I've been telling Cissy I shall send her to school again: she can't keep her accounts, and is really good for nothing but to be looked at; and you are always leading her into mischief, Miss Branscombe."

"I'll take the greatest care of her this time, and bring her home to-morrow in capital condition."

"Well, take her away. I'm the most powerless of prelates: I can never say no to a lady. Good-bye, Cissy; be a good child —I wish I could go with you."

"Come, my lord, incog.," said the daring Claudia, "disguise yourself in crinoline, you've got an apron already."

The good-humoured Bishop dismissed them, and away they drove through Idlechester. Langton still stood on the Half-Moon steps, and Claudia thought rather remorsefully of little Stephen.

"He shall come and dine with us," she said to herself.

"What a good boy the Bishop is," she said aloud to her companion. "He's just the sort of husband I should like."

"He's much too good for me," said Cissy, with a half sigh, "I *am* so silly; and he never scolds, though sometimes I feel that it's his positive duty to box my ears, or something of the kind. You know, Claudia, I have always been such a child. Perhaps if I had children of my own, I shouldn't be quite such a baby."

"Don't be melancholy, Cis. Everybody likes you as you are. I'm going to take you to the very queerest place—a school, where there's a nice little boy that I'm going to take home to dinner."

A little before four o'clock Aunt Harriet drove into Mrs. Sadbrooke's gates in a high gig, drawn by an animal of the cart-horse character. The old tanner trusted nobody but himself with his fast-trotting mare. She was cordially welcomed; the four ladies, all in rustling black silk, were ready to receive her; and over many cups of tea they talked about Stephen.

Aunt Harriet was shocked at his wickedness. Of course seeing

a ghost was all nonsense, and the little rascal was sly—wickedly sly. She had brought him a nice cake, but he certainly shouldn't have it. And she proposed that, as soon as tea was over, he should be sent for, and should then and there receive at her hands a much severer castigation than he had escaped. The proposition gave general satisfaction—especially to Matilda Jane, to whom John Daw had confided the insult he had received.

Thus it happened that at six o'clock, just as Stephen was, with the rest, going to listen to a long Latin grace, precursory to his bread and butter, the amiable Matilda Jane came as a messenger to the schoolroom, and hissed in his ear—

"Come along, you brat; you're wanted directly."

He followed her obediently, and was ushered into the parlour, where his redoubtable Aunt Harriet was added to the scolding and torturing power of the establishment. She glared at him with a kind of fiendish glee, and welcomed him with the exclamation—

"Oh, you naughty wicked boy!"

Stephen stood silent.

"So you tried, you story-telling little thing, to escape punishment by saying you saw poor dear Mr. Sadbrooke. Oh! I'm ashamed of you! I don't believe you *can* be a nephew of mine; but you won't get off so easily, I can tell you. Come here this minute."

Stephen approached, reluctantly enough, and was relentlessly clutched by Aunt Harriet's bony fingers, all knobs at the knuckles; and dire events would assuredly have happened but for the fact that Miss Branscombe's chestnut ponies at that very moment turned in through the gates, and that the widow and her three daughters all ran to the window to watch the arrival. Two singularly handsome women in a singularly stylish equipage had never been seen in that locality before; our black-haired Claudia, brilliant and imperious, dressed in a navy-blue paletot that showed the voluptuous curve of her delicious bust, and holding a parasol-whip in her amber-gauntleted right hand, was an apparition almost as startling to the Sadbrooke family as the Sadbrooke spectre to poor little Stephen. The groom was at the leader's head; our little friend Hugh Thurston had gone to the wheelers; and Claudia, stepping out just opposite the window, revealed to the watching eyes of the Sadbrooke family as well-built, well-stockinged, and well-booted a feminine leg as you'll see anywhere. When on the ground, she held up both her hands to the Bishop's lady, who took them in her own, and sprang easily from the dog-cart.

"It's *that* Miss Branscombe," said Aunt Harriet, who had just reached the window. And then she half regretted the ejaculation, knowing that her father held by the Branscombes.

"Well, I do declare," said the widow, "if it isn't the Bishop's wife. What can they want here?"

As to Stephen, released from Aunt Harriet's bony grip, he opened his eyes widely in wonder.

The ladies were shown in, and everybody stood up to receive them. The widow's three daughters were perfectly appalled at finding themselves in close contact with these two wonderful strangers. Their own dreadful dowdiness became apparent to them; and there was humiliation even for Matilda Jane, who firmly believed herself pretty. But oh! the light of Claudia Branscombe's eyes, the glory of her hair, the delicate whiteness of her diamonded right hand, from which she had taken the glove!

"Mrs. Sadbrooke, I believe?" said Claudia. "I need not detain you a moment. I called to take little Stephen Langton home with me; his grandfather said he might come."

Mrs. Sadbrooke looked meaningly at Aunt Harriet, who, however, required no hint from her.

"I am very sorry," said the maiden aunt, "but Stephen has been naughty, and I don't think he ought to have a holiday."

Claudia looked at her with that haughty impertinent stare of inquiry which is so delightfully natural to some ladies; then turned to Mrs. Sadbrooke, and said—

"This person is one of your governesses, I suppose?"

"Oh no—I beg pardon—Miss Harriet Langton—*Miss* Langton," said the widow in a great hurry.

"Ah! some relation of my little friend Stephen's. And so you have been naughty, have you?" she said, addressing the boy. "Well, run and put your cap on; my ponies won't stand. Be quick. We have all of us been naughty in our time, I suppose, eh, Ciss?" This was addressed to the bishop's wife, and as if the Sadbrookes and Aunt Harriet had ceased to exist.

The latter lady was about to remonstrate once more—but then she was afraid of her father. She didn't like it at all. Here was Stephen snatched from her castigating hands, and taken away for a holiday without even the form of asking leave, by this proud girl, who did not seem to recognise her existence. As for Mrs. Sadbrooke, she wisely thought if Aunt Harriet did not interfere, she need not. In a minute Stephen was back again, ready to start. Claudia drew on her glove, said, with a slight bow, "Good morning, Mrs. Sadbrooke," and was helping Mrs. Bythesea into the tandem cart before Aunt Harriet had time to recover herself.

"Jump up behind, Stephen," she said, "and mind you hold on. Who's that handsome boy that held Flora's head? Master Thurston? Here, Master Thurston, you won't object to a tip from a friend of Stephen's, will you?"

Away went the chestnuts, Stephen clinging on by the side of the groom, while all Mrs. Sadbrooke's pupils looked after them delightedly.

"She's a brick," exclaimed Hugh Thurston, "and no mistake."

Claudia, extravagant minx, had given him a sovereign. "And ain't she a pretty girl? Why, Polly Simcox is nothing to her!"

Now Polly Simcox was a red-faced lass who came round twice a week with a basket of tarts, and whose ruddy rotundity the boys greatly admired. So Claudia ought to have been flattered.

"*Well*," said Aunt Harriet, when they were gone, "I think that young woman's impertinence is perfectly abominable. I never was so treated in my life."

"I should complain about it to Mr. Langton, if I were you, dear," suggested Amelia.

But this was just what Aunt Harriet didn't quite see, for she felt sure that her father would say Miss Branscombe was right. At the same time, she was not disposed to confess her position to the Sadbrooke family. She was happily relieved from her difficulty by the volatile Matilda Jane.

"Do you think that Miss Branscombe pretty?"

"*Pretty!*" exclaimed Arabella, as if there could not be the slightest doubt that Claudia was intensely hideous.

"She's extremely forward," said Mrs. Sadbrooke. "If we'd been a set of gipsies, she couldn't have treated us worse."

"She'll come to no good," said Aunt Harriet.

"As for the Bishop's wife, I wonder she can go about with such a flighty piece," said Amelia.

"What carroty hair that Bishop's wife has got!" said Matilda Jane, in contemptuous criticism of tresses whose profuse beauty would have maddened a pre-Raffaelite painter.

But, unhindered by criticism, the chestnuts brought Claudia and her companions to Kingsleat in good time for dinner. And then, for the first time in his life, Stephen dined. At the Branscombes' there was never any deficiency in supply or in style. The soup, the turbot, and lobster sauce, the roast saddle, the birds, the Amontillado and iced Clicquot, were all as good and as well served as if Devil Branscombe had been there himself. I will not say, as if the Seraph had been there, for the Seraph's critical power was known and dreaded at home as well as abroad. His audacity and accuracy were beyond his years; he would have shut up Tod Heatly on a question of claret, or Colenso on a question of heresy.

Stephen, who possessed the apprehensive forgetive* faculty—and the faculty must be apprehensive before it is forgetive—profited by what he saw and heard. Though brought up among people innately vulgar, the child had a natural refinement. All the influences which at this moment surrounded him were of service to him. He was very silent, very observant. He listened to the sparkling converse of the two ladies, and tried hard to understand it. He asked no questions, but formed his own

* This word—a favourite with the author—belongs to classical English, and comes, not from the word "forget," but from "forge," to make, to frame, to form.

conclusions quietly. He sipped his icy effervescent wine from its shallow glass as if both wine and glass were quite customary things to him.

By and by they went to the drawing-room, and coffee was served, and Claudia, an exquisite musician, sat down to the piano, and played and sang rather for herself than her hearers. Oh! how the royal music sobbed through that sweet white throat of hers, while her fragrant bosom swelled to its flood of passion, and her great black fathomless eyes flashed marvellously! At such a moment had Phœbus Apollo beheld her, would he not have caught her suddenly around her lissom waist, and showered upon her eyes and cheeks and lips the kisses of the god?

She ceased. After a while a clock on the marble mantelpiece struck ten with silver strokes. She came and sat by Stephen on his sofa, and passed her fingers through his hair.

"Now, Cis," she said, "you give us some music."

"I'm too tired, child," said the Bishop's wife; "and it's no good playing or singing after you. Don't you think it's nearly time our little friend went to bed?"

"Oh no; he need not get up early, and I want to talk to him. Who was that wonderful old lady, Stephen, who looked so cross to-day at Mrs. Sadbrooke's?"

"That was Aunt Harriet."

"Indeed! Why, she looked as if she had come over on purpose to torment you."

"I think she had," said Stephen gravely.

"What a funny little fellow he is, Cis!" she said. "What are you going to be when you are a man, Stephen? A tanner, like your grandfather?"

"No," he said decisively. "A poet."

Both ladies laughed.

"A poet!" said Mrs. Bythesea. "Do you know what a poet is?"

"Yes," said Stephen. "Milton was a poet. He saw what other people could not see."

"And can *you* do that?" asked Claudia.

"Yes," he said. "I saw Mr. Sadbrooke's ghost the other night."

"What an odd child!" exclaimed the Bishop's wife. "I hope he won't be waking us up in the night with his ghosts."

"I am not at all afraid of ghosts," said Stephen, in a matter of fact way. "I am used to them. They don't do any harm."

The ladies were rather puzzled how to deal with this young præter-naturalist, so they proposed to go to bed.

"We must find a bed for this child somewhere," remarked Claudia.

It was a quaint spacious house, with rooms opening into each other, and Stephen was snugly ensconced in a small room

between two larger ones, in which slept Miss Branscombe and her friend. And, being undressed, he had to put on a wondrously frilled night-gown of Claudia's, which went down far below his feet. Thus robed, he sank into the softest of beds, and lay dreamily awake. And Cis and Claudia chatted a little; and then they began to disrobe; and

"By degrees
Their rich attire crept rustling to their knees,"

as Mr. Keats has it; and then Claudia felt disposed for a romp, and began to tickle her fair friend, who screamed, and giggled, and at last ran away to her own room; and then Cis came back again for another chat, and whispered to Claudia, "I do believe that child isn't asleep;" and then they talked for half an hour or so about the Idlechester people, and Kingsleat people, and who was going to marry whom; and then the Bishop's wife grew mischievously inclined, and gave Claudia a sharp pinch, and ran away to her own room, and tried to fasten the door; but Claudia was too quick for her, and pushed the door open, and, being a good deal stronger than the Bishop's wife, threw her on the bed, and tickled her warm plump ribs until the suppressed laughter could be controlled no longer, but burst into a shriek; and then, giving her a farewell slap, she wished her good night; and then passing through Stephen's room, she said, "I do declare that child isn't asleep yet, and it's just twelve," and stooping over him, gave him a kiss; and finally, she sank into her own soft nest, and was soon tranquilly asleep.

But the little boy lay long awake, happily awake, thinking of all he had seen that day—contrasting the sordid school, and its scolding women, and its eternal punishments, with this large beautiful house and the two lovely creatures with whom his afternoon had been passed—vainly struggling with the insoluble problem, why he was obliged to live amid ugliness and hatred while there seemed to be so much beauty and so much love in the world—taking quiet notice of everything in his pleasant lofty chamber, for night-lamps were burning in the rooms, diffusing, a mellow light—and wishing it were possible that he could forget the existence of Aunt Harriet, and Mrs. Sadbrooke, and Mr. Vellelly, and live always with people like Miss Branscombe, and Mrs. Bythesea, and kind Mr. Page, and, above all, with sweet Anne Page. And as he thought of his fairy princess, he fell asleep.

And very late was it when he awoke; and to his sensitive nature and thirst for enjoyment there was delight in the fair water of the ample sponge-bath, in the well-supplied breakfast-table, in all the little details of unaccustomed luxury which at every moment he encountered. But all pleasure must have an end; and so poor Stephen in the afternoon found himself once more dropped in the hateful playground, while the chestnuts

carried rapidly away their mistress and her friend. Very disconsolate he looked at this moment; and merry Hugh Thurston, coming up to him, exclaimed—

"Why, Langton, you look as if you couldn't help it. How have you enjoyed your holiday?"

"Oh, delightfully," sighed Stephen.

"We've had a great lark since you went," said Hugh. "Graculus and Matilda Jane ran away to get married, and old Daw heard of it, and went after them in his butcher's cart, and caught them out at the cross-roads, just beyond Idlechester, and brought them back in the cart just like a couple of sheep, tied with the same ropes and all. Oh, didn't they look nice just when he handed them out—and didn't we hooray, rather? And he told Mother Sadbrooke that if she wanted to keep a school, she'd better send her girls out to service. Criky, wasn't she wild?"

The story thus emphatically narrated was quite true, and the incident was an unlucky one for Mrs. Sadbrooke. Not only did the most obliging of butchers quarrel with her, but so did the parents and guardians of too many of her pupils. She did all she could, poor woman. She sent away all three of her daughters; she engaged a remarkably correct young man in the place of Graculus Superbus. But she never flourished afterwards; the school gradually dwindled away, and she and her daughters went somewhere unnoticed in the great ocean of life. The only one Stephen ever saw again was Matilda Jane, who had become under-chambermaid at the Half-Moon at Idlechester.

CHAPTER V.

A LUSTRUM.

FIVE years make a considerable difference in a man after a certain age. Well can I remember when a lustrum seemed a trifle, when, being seventeen or so, I longed to be twenty-two or three; but not such is the feeling of the man—

> "Cujus octavum trepidavit ætas,
> Claudere lustrum."

No; every hour of this divine September, amid whose purple sunsets and calm glories of harvest moonlight I am writing, is worth its weight in diamonds of the brightest water, ruddy rubies, sapphires of the Orient. A lustrum *now* is worth more than all the wealth of all the Hebrew race, from Solomon down to the Rothschilds. The moments flash by like bubbles on a

millrace; the very delight of life makes us mourn life's fleetness. Ah, that we could have learnt the value of time when we had more of it to spend!

Five years passed, and Stephen was sixteen. He had spent most of his school-days at the establishment of a certain Dr. Wood, who got his degree at Erlangen. Wood was a tall man, with a black mane, that caused him to look alarmingly lion-like. He was unrivalled as an advertiser and a castigator, and had by those two arts contrived to get together about a hundred and twenty pupils. As he was a perfectly uneducated man, and not given to expend money lavishly in tutorial salaries, it is not to be supposed that his alumni were over-well taught. But Summer Vale flourished, and the boys were compelled to use their memories, if none of their higher faculties, and Stephen learnt the Church Catechism, the Eton Latin Grammar, and the first six books of Euclid, so thoroughly by rote, without understanding a word of either, that he never forgot them again. In course of years the meaning of certain parts of them gradually discovered itself to him, and he always associated his duty towards his neighbour with a severe flogging he got on Monday morning for not being able to remember the catechetic details of the said duty on Sunday evening.

Wood, being a big man, was of course married to a sharp little vixen of a wife. Mrs. Wood altogether transcended both Aunt Harriet and Mrs. Sadbrooke: hers was no whining scold, but a short, sharp objurgation of far more terrifying moment, frequently followed by the rapid application of a very vigorous hand. The way in which she would collar a refractory youngster, reverse him over anything handy, and snatching off his slipper, apply it violently to the tenderest part of him, was really marvellous. Quick in sight, in speech, in motion, Mrs. Wood was the ruling genius of the school; she pervaded it; she kept everybody in order, not forgetting her husband. He, in fact, was merely a negative man, big, stupid, strong, and wisely obedient to his wife.

Stephen, beyond the elements of learning we have mentioned, picked up nothing at Wood's. But to know Euclid, and the Catechism, and the Eton Grammar by heart is something, at any rate. The favourite game at Wood's was football, played on a wide common about a mile from the school: Stephen, who was growing ridiculously fast, had not wind enough for this glorious exercise. But the boy, though quiet, was not unpopular. His ancient story-telling talent was not lost; it was his wont to begin a tale on the first night of the half year, and to continue it right away to the end. Schoolboys love these interminable stories, with episode within episode, like Chinese balls within one another. Moreover, our young hero had taken to rhyming, and wrote love-letters, acrostic and elegant, for his schoolfellows, and once or twice obtained half-holidays for a cleverish copy of verses.

So he got on among the boys comfortably enough, and rather enjoyed his school days. It was customary to end each term at Summer Vale with public recitations; and when Stephen was deemed old enough to play *Mark Antony* in "Julius Cæsar," and actually had the delight of addressing his "Friends, Romans, countrymen," to Mr. Page and his dear little daughter, among other auditors, he was a happy boy.

For Mr. Page did not forget him. In the vacations, Stephen was more at Mr. Page's house than at his grandfather's. Anne was still his little sweetheart; her lustrum had not brought her beyond childhood's delicious days of love and truth; and her governess, Miss Marsden, had not been able to spoil her. For though that excellent young person, like most governesses, had faith in learning facts by heart, and believed that music and dancing, drawing and French, were far more important than the classical literature of England, she was fortunately prevented from having her own way. Mr. Page superintended his little girl's education, and would make her read an essay of Elia's, or learn a lyric of Herrick's or Shelley's, when Miss Marsden would have been dosing her with French verbs, or setting her to learn by rote the names of all the rivers in Europe. And when Stephen had his holidays, lessons were suspended, and the two young people renewed their garden rambles, or strolled through the cathedral close, and by the river marge, while Stephen told his stories as fluently as ever.

But there were others to whom this lustrum had brought a change. Old Langton was a trifle heavier than before, and sat longer and drank more after dinner. His sons were slightly altered; his grandsons were learning to be tanners, Stephen of course excepted; his wife still sat by the parlour window and uttered oracular sentences; and his daughter Harriet was perhaps rather more mistress than ever, in consequence of his growing indolence. Little Mary Langton was still the sweetest-tempered and most obedient of girls, and still Aunt Harriet's patient victim. Her father and mother seemed to have given her up to the strong-willed virgin, who was too crafty to tyrannise over Mary in the old man's presence.

Of the Branscombes, Idlechester and Kingsleat knew little. Claudia had long rejoined her father and brother in London. She was the queen of that fast world in which Devil Branscombe lived. Her rare beauty and wild wit brought crowds of adorers to her feet. Willing to flirt to the utmost, she never went beyond flirtation. Many a foolish boy lost his heart to the Panther—as some coiner of nicknames had called her—and his money to her father at the various games which occupied the nights at his villa. Claudia was the gayest creature in town, apparently: nobody dressed so superbly, or rode so daringly, or drove such ponies as the Panther. Nobody had such a wild, witching, reckless way. Her career was all triumph. But there were moments,

I know, when Claudia's dark eyes filled with tears as she thought of what might have been—as she looked back upon wasted years, all gaiety and frivolity, without one touch of love.

The Rev. Walter Branscombe was as placid and popular as ever—a model Rector of Kingsleat, and a model Canon of the Cathedral. And Winifred grew more and more saintly. People fancied a halo or rainbow around that pretty head of hers. She was still a little too extreme in her high-churchism for the Rector. There was a young clergyman, good-looking and fluent, and possessed of a little money, who had started drowsy Idlechester by attempting to establish monasteries and nunneries, and by walking the streets in a costume between that of a ballet-girl and a blue-coat boy. He called himself Father Remigius, and to him Saint Winifred was wont to confess. Almost simultaneously, a new dissenting sect had arisen in the city: a little vivacious garrulous man dropped suddenly from some unknown part of America, and called himself "The Angel of the Church in Idlechester," and established his *cultus* in an unoccupied loft. His energy soon brought him feminine followers, and among them was Aunt Harriet.

Such was the position of some of our acquaintances when Stephen, a lanky lad of sixteen, came home for his midsummer holidays. Aunt Harriet didn't like his arrival at all. He had got beyond her, unpleasantly. He had grown so tall that she could not reach to box his ears, and she had grave doubts whether he would quietly submit to corporal punishment. So, perforce, she left him alone; and he did not trouble her much, for he spent most of his time, happily and not uselessly, at Mr. Page's. But on one occasion he contrived to get in her way. It was a sultry, drowsy forenoon, and Stephen was for some reason spending it at home. He sat in the parlour window-seat, with his long legs in a chair, reading Chapman's Homer, a loan from his benefactor on the other side of the street. His grandfather came in hurriedly and said—

"Steve, run upstairs, and tell your aunt I want her."

Stephen obliged; and found Aunt Harriet in the well-known schoolroom, but with only one pupil. his quiet little Cousin Mary, who was about two years younger than himself. Mary's eyes were red with weeping, and she looked altogether so miserable that when her persecutor had gone downstairs, Stephen tried to console her.

"What has she been doing to you, Polly?" he asked.

"Oh, it's always the same," sobbed the poor child. "She gives me such long lessons I can't learn them, and such a lot of sewing to do I can't possibly get through it, and then she beats me for not doing it."

"Why, she doesn't *always* beat you," said Stephen, "does she?"

"Very nearly," said Mary. "I've got all these tasks to learn

by twelve o'clock, and she says she'll whip me if I make a mistake, and"——

But Mary did not proceed, for Aunt Harriet had entered the room, and was regarding her with a terrible look.

"So, miss," she exclaimed, "you dare tell such dreadful stories—you dare"——

And she rushed towards her poor unresisting victim, to inflict condign punishment. But Stephen intercepted her raised right arm, catching it by the wrist; and not being ready with a speech appropriate to the great occasion, exclaimed—

"Why don't you hit one of your own size?"

Never before had Aunt Harriet suffered such an indignity. She was speechless with rage. The sudden shock of open rebellion made her hysterical, and she at length gave utterance to a shrill shriek that was heard throughout the house. Old Mr. Langton, who was just coming out of the parlour, walked heavily upstairs to see what was the matter. Entering the room, he looked with considerable astonishment at his hysterical daughter, his sobbing granddaughter, and especially at his grandson, who, commonly the quietest of boys, seemed now daring and defiant.

"Now then," he said, "what's up?"

"It's Aunt Harriet," said Stephen promptly. "She's always pitching into poor little Polly, and I went and stopped her."

The tanner swore a sonorous oath, after his manner when annoyed.

"You ever lay your finger on little Polly again," he said to his daughter, "and I'll break every bone in your skin. Stephen, you're a good lad; here's half-a-crown for you. Cheer up, Polly; come along with me; I'm going down to the farm, and you shall ride with me."

Luckless Aunt Harriet was left solitary in the schoolroom, thoroughly defeated.

Of course, this incident in nowise sweetened her temper towards Stephen. So one evening, not very dissimilar in its events from that in which the boy's fate had five years before been decided, she called again her two brothers into council. What was to be done with him? Neither of them had any suggestion to make.

"He's been at school quite long enough," she said. "It's time he was earning something."

"He's a likely lad," said Uncle Tom; "but we've got boys enough about the place. Better apprentice him to some trade. There's Stokes the druggist wants a 'prentice."

"That costs money," said Uncle Charles. "*I* haven't got any to spare; I don't know if *you* have."

"I wonder if he'd do for teacher in a school," said Aunt Harriet.

And she produced a copy of a certain monthly periodical called the "Evangelical Magazine," wherein she had noticed an adver-

tisement to the effect that the Rev. Edward Hooper wanted a junior assistant—"salary moderate." There should be moderation in all things; why not in salaries?

"He's too young for that work, I should think," said Uncle Tom. "Why, he's only a boy himself; how's he to keep other boys in order?"

"Well, there's no harm in trying," said Aunt Harriet. "He'll be off our hands, you know, and I should think the wages would pay for his clothes."

"I'll write to this Mr. Hooper," said Uncle Charles, who rejoiced in a fine flowing manuscript, and was the chief correspondent of the establishment.

He wrote accordingly, and received an early reply.

Mr. Hooper was a Congregational minister in the large village of Eastford, about twenty miles from Idlechester. He received six pupils, and wanted a tutor to look after them out of school hours, and to teach the younger ones. The salary he offered was ten pounds a year to begin with. He should be in Idlechester on Saturday, and would call on Mr. Charles Langton.

He kept his appointment. He was one of the kindest and simplest of men, this Dissenting minister. He was not clever, and he knew it; but he was thoroughly good, and he did not know it. He received half a dozen pupils—all he had room for; and though they did not learn very much, they led a very happy life, having plenty to eat, and not being perpetually subjected to physical torture. He saw Stephen and thought him young, certainly—but that was a fault that would mend every day.

"I wish I was as young," he said in a pleasant tone, that was not intelligible to sour Uncle Charles and acrid Aunt Harriet.

"He is tall for his age," said Mr. Hooper. "There is only one of the boys as old, and he will go away at Christmas. My young friend need not tell anybody how old he is."

So Stephen was engaged for the end of the holidays; and Aunt Harriet, after seeing the minister's good-tempered face, felt doubtful whether she had obtained her end. She wanted her objectionable nephew to be uncomfortable, and had pictured to herself a sordid establishment like Mrs. Sadbrooke's.

Stephen himself, not knowing precisely what he ought to think of his destiny, consulted Mr. Page. That gentleman gave him kind encouragement.

"I have heard of this Mr. Hooper," he said. "Indeed, Lumley the bookseller, whom I deal with, has a boy at his school. You'll be very comfortable there. Your great difficulty, young as you are, will be to maintain authority; and that difficulty you can only conquer by experience. And as you will have plenty of time and of books be sure that you study; work at Latin, and Greek, and Mathematics; try to educate yourself: self-education is difficult, but it is the best sort of education."

So when August came Stephen got upon the box of the East-

ford coach at the Half-Moon Hotel in excellent spirits. Little Lumley, the bookseller's son, went down with him. Old Burroughs, the coachman, was a character; he told the most incredible stories about the places through which they passed, with an air of grave truthfulness; he was a skilful birdcatcher; and as they drove through miles of woodland, he kept up a perpetual conversation with the feathered dwellers in the trees. No man could wile a nightingale so well as Burroughs; so he always had two or three of those delicious birds at his house at Eastford, and a whole college of canaries hard at work learning to mock their music. The trade in these canaries, bought at about a shilling each and sold at half a guinea, was quite a profitable affair for old Burroughs. Need I say that one of his best performers was very soon singing away for the benefit of sweet Anne Page?

Mr. Hooper's family consisted of his wife, two boys, and two girls. The boys were lazy, good-tempered little rascals; the elder girl, about Stephen's own age, was at school at Idlechester. Stephen, who now found himself promoted to "Mr. Langton," was soon very much at home; his natural quickness of intellect caused his pupils to forget his youth; and, having considerable talent for mathematics, wherein the worthy minister was rather slow, his utility was quickly recognised. He had plenty of time for reading, and followed Mr. Page's advice, giving himself an education which was of necessity irregular and desultory, but which perhaps suited his temperament better than a more rigorous training. And then, by way of recreation, there were long walks through a fine country, on one side densely wooded, on the other rising into bold chalk downs that stretched leagues away through half a dozen shires. On those free hills Stephen, who had been growing too fast, found health and strength; and the delicate child whom Claudia Branscombe had petted rapidly developed into an active athletic specimen of the human race.

By and by Miss Hooper, having finished her education, came home permanently. What else she may have learnt I know not, but of flirtation she had become an absolute mistress. No sooner did she see Stephen than she determined to victimise that young gentleman. Now Stephen, though at eleven he had felt a kind of poetic love for sweet Anne Page, and though that pretty child was always his visionary princess, causing him to write many puerile verses, some of which found their way to the *Idlechester Chronicle*, was tardy in his development. Like Philip Hewson, in Clough's poem, he took a long time to understand the relation of man to woman. Miss Mary Ann Hooper found him quite a clod. He could not make out what she wanted. It was excessively provoking. There he was, a fine-looking young fellow, living in the same house with her, and she could not make the least impression on him. She did not believe he knew the colour of her eyes. She contrived innumerable opportunities for

flirtation—got him to help her in her studies, to mend her pens, to listen to her singing—all to no purpose. If Stephen had been a statue he could not have been less impressible.

At last a wonderful opportunity arrived. The village of Eastford had not many amusements, so any that offered were seized with avidity. It was announced by placards and the sonorous utterance of the bellman—that a Mr. Villiers, with no end of letters after his name, would give, at the Mechanics' Institute, a series of lectures on mesmerism. Mr. Hooper went and all his establishment. The audience were delighted. Mr. Villiers was marvellously fluent, and if he dropped a good many h's, what matter? He brought with him a couple of subjects—a big man to do the enduring part of the business, a small boy to do the intelligent parts. The big man had pins stuck into him, and sniffed strong *liquor ammoniæ*, and kept his legs outstretched, while two or three heavy people sat upon them; the small boy read with the back of his head and the soles of his feet, and told young ladies their Christian names, and described the interiors of people's houses. Then Mr. Villiers went in for phrenology, and gravely advocated the importance of ascertaining what children's heads contained before educating them. The Rev. Edward Hooper was delighted, and brought the lecturer home to supper.

After supper the man of science became most agreeable, and fairly earned his hot gin and water. He mesmerised one or two of the boys, who had been allowed to sit up on this great occasion, and performed remarkable tricks with them. He mesmerised Mary Ann Hooper, and that young lady made two or three creditable attempts at clairvoyance while in the trance. He tried to mesmerise Stephen, but gave him up with the remark that his was the mesmerising temperament, and that he would make a good operator. And so fluently did he talk about the value of phrenology as a guide to educators, and of mesmerism as a remedy for disease, that the worthy minister bought a manual, and a mapped-out head, and resolved to analyse his boys' intellects, and to mesmerise all the sick people of his congregation.

So mesmerism and phrenology became the fashion; and Stephen, himself insusceptible of the mesmeric influence, found that he could mesmerise almost anybody. The thing puzzled him a good deal. He could not get it out of his head that all these people who went into trances, and did astonishing things while entranced, were in reality shamming. But why should such a number of people join in the imposture? And some of them were highly respectable, and indeed notorious for their extreme gravity. It was not likely to occur to him that a young lady of a somewhat rigorous Dissenting sect, and educated in the strictest propriety, might perhaps like to pretend to be mesmerised in order to have a little fun without being scolded for

it. Besides, there was the fact that good Mr. Hooper contrived to effect several cures. One paralytic old woman actually walked to chapel after his manipulations, not having walked previously for years. It was very odd. Stephen bought treatises on mesmerism and neurhypnotism, and studied the *Zoïst*, and the *Critic*—a journal which at that time went in for mesmerism. I believe it went in for everything imaginable by turns, till at last it went out altogether.

Sitting in the schoolroom one summer afternoon, Stephen was solving equations. He had a knack at such numerical conundrums, and so liked them. The schoolroom was at the back of the house, on the first floor; there was a door down a flight of steps to a courtyard, and from the windows were seen Mr. Hooper's chapel, a rectangular building of red brick, and its rather picturesque grave-yards—a capital prospect for a professed ghost-seer like Stephen; but his developing animalism had tended to lessen his connection with the preternatural world, and he had not seen a ghost for a long time. There came a tap at the inner door of the schoolroom, and Miss Hooper entered.

"O Mr. Langton," she said, speaking in italics, "I *hope* I don't disturb your studies, but I've got *such* a bad headache, and I want you to mesmerise me, and see if you can cure it."

Stephen professed strong doubts as to his ability to operate, but Miss Hooper was quite sure that he would succeed. So she placed herself in a chair, and he stood over her and manipulated.

Always provided that a man is not weak in the back or in the eyes, mesmerising a nice girl is rather a pleasant amusement. Bending over her, holding her hands in yours, you gaze into her eyes, and her fragrant breath ascends towards you. Stephen *was* rather weak in the back, thanks to his quick growth; but his eyes were all right, whence doubtless his mesmeric success. And so, after he had looked into Mary Ann Hooper's eyes for a minute or two, those orbs filled with tears, and the lids gradually closed over them, and the young lady was mesmerised.

When Stephen saw her lying back in her chair, satisfactorily entranced, it occurred to him that he should like very much to know whether she was really mesmerised or only shamming. How should he ascertain? He began by putting her through her facings, according to Mr. Villier's formula. He touched her organ of combativeness, and she tried to box his ears; of tune, and she sang; of philoprogenitiveness, and she hugged an imaginary baby; of veneration, and she dropped upon her knees and said her prayers; of amativeness, and I am sorry to say she embraced him. He comatised her arm, and then pinched it rather sharply, and she didn't scream. She was the most docile of subjects. But was she really in the mystical trance of Mesmer?

This was what perplexed Stephen, and he could not hit upon any way of testing her sincerity. He walked up and down the room,

trying to invent a decisive experiment. At last, though a bashful youngster naturally, he thought of something which it seemed to him must surely solve the problem. It took him some time to make up his mind to do so daring a deed. However, remembering that it was all in the cause of science, and summoning to his side that royal aphorism, *Honi soit qui mal y pense*—he positively took off one of Miss Mary Ann's garters! She did not flinch, and the truth of mesmerism was established.

It, shall I say?—ought to have been. Stephen, having begun to be sceptical, found it difficult to conquer his doubts. And he argued thus: Miss Hooper pretends to be mesmerised. If she is shamming, she would not like to be convicted of shamming. Now, when I took off her garter, if she had allowed her modesty to terminate the imposture, her character for truthfulness would have been lost. But now, when she wakes, or pretends to wake, she may of course wonder what has become of the article in question.

And then Stephen had to decide whether he had better put the garter on again, or not. At last he resolved to retain it; so he locked it up in a rickety quadrupedal desk which was his post of authority. And the next thing that he did was to start for a walk, without awakening his patient. He was determined to see whether, if left alone, she would wake of herself, a thing which, according to the mesmeric theory, he had learnt could never happen. So away he strode down the long zigzag street of Eastford, leaving Miss Hooper alone.

Now, to reveal a humiliating truth, Mary Ann *was* shamming. And, when she heard Stephen's departing step upon the paved courtyard below, she arose from the chair in which she had acted her part so well, and stretched herself, feeling rather cramped, and reflected bitterly on Stephen's stolidity.

"Well," she said to herself, "he shan't mesmerise me again in a hurry. I never saw such a stupid fellow. The idea of his leaving me here asleep! Well, I'm not going to stay till the boys come in, or perhaps papa."

So off the young lady went; and when Stephen saw her in the evening, he merely hoped that her headache was better. There was no flirtation to be got out of him evidently, even with the potent aid of mesmerism.

No; Stephen, even when the lustrum had twice passed over his head, was a mere boy still. His growth was slow, both physical and mental. In due time he came of age legally; but of age individually he was not, until events suddenly brought out his latent powers, and aroused his dormant energies.

CHAPTER VI.

OF AGE.

BY a garden fount which we have seen before, on a turfen mound beneath an acacia, are two whom we know. Sweet Anne Page leaned idly against the tree, her broad straw hat in her hand, her beautiful hair touched by the tints of sunlight that dropped through the long light leaves. Stephen looked down into her calm brown eyes—tranquil eyes, beneath eyebrows of a perfect arch, and a fair smooth forehead—and said—

"Do you love me, Anne?"

It was a grave question to ask this charming child at the threshold of her seventeenth year; but no blush tinged her fair cheek, nor did the lids drop over those tender eyes, as she replied—

"You know I love you, Stephen."

Then he stooped, and pressed his lips to hers. He had never asked her this question before, but, as she said, he knew she loved him. And her father also knew it, and was satisfied. He had faith in Stephen Langton, as well as liking for him. So, in these halcyon days, the boy and girl enjoyed their love-dream. It was the honeymoon of the heart; Stephen was trustful, and ineffably content. Anne was sweet, sweet, sweet. No coquetry about her, no teasing tendency, no desire to quarrel with her lover for the delightful pleasure of making it up again. No, Anne Page realised the delicious old word, *sweetheart.* She was all love, to the very core.

Yet, do you know? I doubt whether either she or Stephen had yet learnt what love meant.

As they strolled in the shade from one garden pleasaunce to another, they were joined by Mr. Page.

"Stephen," he said, "I want you to drive over to the Kingsleat Library, and ask Mr. Lonsdale if he has a work whose name I have written down. It is very rare, but I think it may be there. I would not interrupt your pleasant conversation, but I don't feel quite well enough to go myself. Anne should go with you, but we are expecting Miss Branscombe, and she must be at home to receive her."

"I will go with pleasure, sir," said Stephen; and just raised Anne's slender white fingers to his lips, and then went off to order out the phaeton.

Miss Branscombe—Claudia Branscombe, unmarried still, though now advanced in her third decade—was coming to stay with her young cousin. It has not yet been mentioned that the late Mrs. Page was a half-sister of Devil Branscombe's and the Rector's, a

good many years younger than they. And Stephen had not long been gone when Claudia arrived. Time had rather ripened her beauty; and, though a keen eye might have perceived that the freshness was gone which lay upon her cheeks like the dewy bloom on a peach in those days when she romped with the Bishop's wife, yet there was beauty enough left for a multitude of ordinary women. And verily the Panther's was such a lithe lissom leaping beauty, such a perilous charm, such a magic of delicious daring, of defiant tamelessness.

Devil Branscombe was in difficulties, nobody knew exactly where, and he didn't mean that anybody should. The Seraph was at Bagnères de Luchon, making love to a princess, or something of the sort. He had a *penchant* for princesses. So Claudia had invited herself to Idlechester—and here she was.

"Oh you quiet little darling!" she exclaimed to Anne Page, as that young lady showed her the arrangements made for her comfort. "Why, you have grown quite a pretty girl! And you are so delightfully young—you've all the fun to come. Now, you sly puss, tell me, has anybody ventured to fall in love with you yet?"

It did not take Claudia long to find out her cousin's love-secret.

"Stephen Langton," she said reflectively, when she had elicited the name. "Why, that's the nice little boy I took a fancy to when he was at school somewhere near Kingsleat. A blue-eyed, light-haired little fellow, who used to see ghosts. Is *he* old enough to fall in love? Dear me, why, he was a mere baby."

"He is ever so much older than I am," said Anne, rather indignant at her lover's being talked of as a child.

"Is he really? Then how old must *I* be, Cousin Anne? Tell me that. Old enough to be your mamma nearly, little one. And where is Mr Stephen Langton now?"

"He's gone to Kingsleat for papa. You'll see him at dinner."

"And does he see ghosts still? But there, I won't tease you, Anne," she said, kissing her. "He only sees babies in your eyes, I suppose, as some old poet says."

"What do you mean?" asked Anne.

"Why, don't you know? Look into my eyes, dear. There, don't you see a pretty little girl in each?"

"I see my own reflection."

"Well, that's what I mean. But you see it a great deal better in Mr. Stephen Langton's bright blue eyes than in those black ones of mine. Be sure you try when he comes back."

The Kingsleat Library, to which Stephen was gone, was an ancient institution. Its Librarian, Mr. Lonsdale, received two hundred a year and a residence—a very quaint residence indeed, the principal sitting-room being over an archway which crossed the steep street of the little town. By the founder's will, the Librarian was of necessity a graduate of Oxford; and the appoint-

ment was vested in three persons, the Rector of Kingsleat, the Mayor of Kingsleat, and the Head Master of Kingsleat Grammar School. After the Librarian's salary was paid, all the surplus funds went to the purchase of books, of which the choice lay with the Librarian alone, the statutes directing him to make a complete collection of the best English literature. The library was a remarkably good one, but very little used; only a few of the more thoughtful inhabitants of Kingsleat ever sat in its quiet rooms, whose wide windows opened on a pleasant garden. Not long before there had been an attempt to turn Mr. Lonsdale out of his situation as Librarian, and made by no less a personage than the Duke of Axminster. Kingsleat was a pocket borough of that haughty Duke's; but of late years the electors had once or twice ventured to dispute his will, and had succeeded in returning one member of their own choice. It looked very much as if his grace would have to content himself with selecting only one of the two members. This sorely annoyed the proudest of the ducal rank. He turned out with slight ceremony a good many luckless shopkeepers who had dared to vote against his nominee, and he was anxious to revenge his defeat on several others, among whom was Mr. Lonsdale. Now the three trustees, the Mayor and Rector and Head Master, *if unanimous*, could dismiss the Librarian. So the Duke sent Mr. Drax, the great Mr. Drax, to those three gentlemen.

The Mayor, a respectable tea-dealer, would do anything to oblige his grace and Mr. Drax. Mr. Drax might consider it settled, so far as he was concerned.

The Rev. Walter Branscombe dined pretty often with the Duke, when that nobleman was at Beau Sejour—a little gem of a place near Kingsleat, which the Duke much affected. And a haunch, than which

> "Finer or fatter
> Never ranged in a forest, or smoked on a platter,"

came not seldom from the Duke's deer-park to the Rectory. So the Reverend Walter was not slow to choose between the great potentate and the Librarian, and assured his grace's agent of his willingness to punish Mr. Lonsdale for venturing to have political opinions contrary to those of the Duke.

Mr. Drax had knowingly left the hardest part of the negotiation till the last. Dr. Winter—the "severe Winter," as his pupils called him—was a man who chose to think for himself. He was a St. John's College man, third wrangler of his year, and a most elegant writer of Greek iambics. Under his resolute and brilliant rule Kingsleat Grammar School had beaten in university honours the larger establishment in the cathedral city. He was a determined opponent of the modern sloppy system which teaches a little of everything; he held by his classics and mathematics with an obstinacy which lacerated the hearts of the trustees, who

were terribly afraid of him. When he preached before the university he chose as a topic, "The Irregular Element in the Church," and horrified the orthodox by maintaining that the Apostle Paul was the first of the Dissenters. He had written a book whose theologic teaching was popularly believed to be abominably heretical; but luckily it was in classical Latin, and so the erudite editors of the *Record* and *Morning Advertiser* could not criticise it. He had published a pamphlet, subjecting to merciless analysis one of Bishop Bythesea's charges; and had produced a dreadful Greek epigram on the Dean's marriage. His keen logic, dry humour, and sound scholarship made him more than a match for any opponent he was likely to encounter in the narrow arena of the diocese of Idlechester.

The great lawyer was tall, big-headed, white-waistcoated, corpulent. The doctor was a middle-sized man, nervous and active, always in capital condition, from being a lover of long walks. Mr. Drax called at the grammar-school just as the morning walk was over. In came Winter in cap and gown, the former battered, the latter a mere fragment of its integral form. The solicitor opened the case very cautiously.

"Pardon me, Mr. Drax," said the doctor, when he had uttered a few sentences, "but this is a serious matter. If I understand aright, the Duke of Axminster has some complaint to make against Mr. Lonsdale's conduct as Librarian. Any such complaint must come to me directly from the Duke himself. I cannot listen to lawyers or agents in such a matter."

Mr. Drax was baffled, and the Duke was extremely angry. But he did not give it up. There happened a few weeks later to be some ecclesiastic festival at Idlechester. The Duke attended, contrary to his custom, and much to the delight of the Bishop, his sole object being to meet the doctor. He thought that the immense honour of being courteously addressed by so great a prince as himself, would completely subjugate this schoolmaster. There was a cold collation at the Palace. As the great man sat, with rubicund expressionless face and glassy uninterested eyes, at the right hand of the Bishop's lady, he asked our little friend Cis to point out Dr. Winter. She indicated the doctor's keen and thoughtful face half-way down the table. The Duke sent a footman to ask the doctor to take wine with him. The doctor assented, of course. His grace fancied that, when luncheon was over, Dr. Winter would be drawn towards him by some social magnetism, but nothing of the kind took place. At last, by a series of skilful evolutions, the Duke and the doctor were somehow brought together; and after a few commonplace observations, his grace began to talk of the luckless Librarian. Dr. Winter cut him short at once.

"It is not a matter to be discussed here, your grace must admit. I will make an appointment to hear what you have to say, if that seems desirable."

The Duke of Axminster was filled with silent rage. This contumacious pedagogue was the first man who had ever thwarted him. Still he persisted in his project, and invited Dr. Winter to lunch at Beau Sejour. The Duchess and the Lady Gwendoline Araminta were all smiles and sweetness. You might almost have thought the younger lady in love with the middle-aged schoolmaster. Dr. Winter liked claret, and the Duke gave him a bottle whose bouquet was like a lyric of Anacreon's. The doctor enjoyed his wine, and was much amused, for he knew well what was coming.

It came. Of course the Duke of Axminster, a cabinet minister, accustomed to perorate in stately periods in the House of Lords, put the question with lofty plausibility. But Dr. Winter was too keen for him. He soon brought him to admit that Mr. Lonsdale's sole crime was voting against the Duke's nominee.

"If Mr. Lonsdale had not done his duty," said the doctor, "I hope that I, in common with the other trustees, should have discovered it without your grace's kind interference. But I really think it would be hard to find so able and conscientious a Librarian."

So the Duke was foiled utterly. As Dr. Winter was taking his leave, he said—

"Your grace was at Eton under Keate, I think?"

The Duke replied affirmatively, little thinking that he was furnishing material for a biting epigram, which should describe him as too great a bully for even Keate's untiring birch to cure. Such was his fate, however; and Winter did not conceal the cajoleries to which he had been subjected in order to induce him to persecute Mr. Lonsdale; and the affair did a good deal of harm to the ducal influence. Mighty magnates like the Duke of Axminster ought not to run the risk of being laughed at.

At the Kingsleat Library, whither he often went for Mr. Page, Stephen had made acquaintance with a youth nearly his own age, Humphrey Morfill, a nephew of Dr. Winter's. The doctor, who had no children of his own, had made a scholar and mathematician of this young man, who was now at Cambridge, at his uncle's college. Morfill was born full of talent and ambition, and had already made up his mind to go to the bar, and to enter Parliament, and to occupy a high position. He was full of faith in himself, of disbelief in failure. He and Stephen took to one another naturally, but Stephen could not help envying those trained and practised faculties which enabled his friend to do exactly what he wanted to do. Lord Stanley once talked of men who are described as having great command of language, when probably it would be more true to say that language had a great command of them—because they have about as much command over it as a man has over a runaway horse. Now there are men (Lord Stanley is one) who have perfect command of their own faculties; while there are others whose faculties are sometimes

too strong for them, and who, purposing to do a certain thing, are constrained to do something else, which may perhaps be a better thing. Mr. Robert Lytton, better known as Owen Meredith, put this fairly in the line—"Genius does what it *must*, but talent does what it *can*." As, however, he seems to have borrowed everything he ever said, I suppose the remark really belongs to somebody else. Well, Humphrey Morfill knew his own powers accurately, and always did what he attempted to do, while Stephen Langton, making vain endeavours in every direction, seemed always stretching towards the unattainable. He was too apt to ascribe to his defective and desultory education what really belonged to his idiosyncrasy.

Stephen and Humphrey met to-day at the Library, and the latter asked his friend to drive him to Idlechester, where he had some business. So they started together, and talked as they went, and Stephen told Humphrey of Miss Branscombe's advent.

"Ah!" said Morfill, "I recollect those Branscombes. A queer lot, rather. But this Miss Branscombe must be getting quite an old woman."

"Well, yes. I remember her ten years ago or more, when she came and took me away from school—she and the Bishop's wife. She used to drive two ponies tandem. I suppose she must be very much altered."

And Stephen fell to considering whether the beautiful Claudia of his vague reminiscence was likely to have developed into a creature like Aunt Harriet.

"Are you going back to that dissenting parson's at Eastford?" asked Humphrey.

"Yes; there's nothing else for me to do. I suppose you'll write to me from Cambridge now and then?"

"I believe you—and send you all manner of university news, from St. John's College problems downwards. By the way, here's a quadratic my beloved uncle gave me this morning. I know you like those things."

And he handed to Stephen a scrap of paper whereon was written, in Dr. Winter's quaint MS.—

$$x^2 - 25 + \sqrt{\left(36 - \frac{324}{x^2}\right)} = \frac{24}{x}.$$

"I suppose it's only a catch," said Stephen. "They are just like conundrums or rebuses, these things."

"True, but they're amusing, and rather puzzling."

"For girls," said Stephen contemptuously. "I don't care to see mathematics playing tricks. However, I'll solve the equation to please you."

"I bet you a tankard of bitter you don't," laughed Humphrey. "And we'll stop now at the Half-Moon, and you shall pay for the ale in anticipation."

In the cool bar parlour of the old Half-Moon they were served with their *amari aliquid* by "Jack" Winslow. Jack's real name was Emily; and she was the only daughter and spoilt child of the rotund old landlord; and she was a fine flirting brunette, given to wildish tricks, but without a morsel of harm in her. Her father was the principal owner of the mail-coaches on the Eastford road, and she used occasionally to drive the first stage down, and come back with the up coach, very much to the disgust of sober and timid passengers. But old Winslow couldn't be persuaded to interfere.

"I've given her her head," he used to say, "and I ain't strong enough in the arm to pull her in."

"Well, Jack," said Humphrey, "how jolly you look! It cools one to come in here and see you this broiling weather."

"You're always cool enough, Mr. Morfill," she said.

"Well, and what's the news, Jack? Have you upset the coach yet?"

"I'm not quite such a duffer as you are to drive," she said. "Why, I thought you were going to let the doctor's old pony run away with you the other day. I hope you do your Latin and Greek better than you handle the ribbons, or you'll be plucked, safe as eggs."

"Come, Humphrey, it's no good," said Stephen, "Jack carries too many guns for you. What *is* the news, Miss Winslow, if you happen to know any?"

For Jack was Idlechester's chief gossip, and picked up all the fragments of intelligence.

"The only thing I know isn't news to you, I expect, Master Stephen. Miss Claudia's come to town, and gone to Mr. Page's. I saw her come in by the coach."

"How was she looking?" asked Humphrey. "Very old?"

"Old! No, prettier than ever she did. I never saw such eyes or such hair—or such a figure, for that matter. She *is* a beauty, if you like."

"Why, Stephen and I were just saying how old she must be getting. How old is she, Jack?"

"I don't know. Five-and-twenty, perhaps—though she don't look it. Father, how old is Miss Claudia?"

For the burly landlord had just come in from the bar, with a tumbler in his hand, and something in the tumbler.

"How old? Well, there's Master Raphael, he was born just afore I married, that's over thirty years ago. And then there was another boy, as died—Claude, they called him. And when the gal was born, they called her Claudia, after him like. Oh, she's about eight-and-twenty, I should think. Time she married, if she's ever going to."

"Perhaps her father's like you," said Jack, "and don't want to part with her."

The old gentleman laughed uproariously.

"Why, you hussy," he said, "anybody might have you for a screw of baccy and a light."

"Come," said Stephen, "we must be off. I'm rather curious to see Miss Branscombe."

So the young men departed, and Stephen, depositing his friend at the door of the bookseller's in High Street, went on to Mr. Page's. It was approaching the dinner hour. The ladies were lounging in the garden, where an occasional breeze freshened the drowsy sultry atmosphere. Stephen delivered his message to Mr. Page, and went in search of them.

He found them in the very nook where he and his sweetheart had talked of love that morning. Claudia, leaning back against the acacia, caught in the placid darkness of her eyes a light from the unclouded heaven. Sweet Anne Page was gazing at her, as if in marvel at such surpassing beauty. So silent were they, that Stephen, who came towards them across the turf, heard not a sound save the plash of the fountain, and the low coo of a brown ringdove on an acacia bough.

Claudia greeted him pleasantly, though it was hard for her to recognise in this tall youth the little boy whom she had petted years before, and for whom her night-dress had been a world too long. Both remembered the incident distinctly enough: to Stephen indeed that snatch of holiday came like an oasis in the desert of long unhappy school-days. After a while the conversation grew freer and more fluent; and Claudia began to talk in that sparkling style which only women who have seen society can command. It was amazing to Stephen, just of an age to court that difficult learning which is called knowledge of the world; while to the innocent babyhood of sweet Anne Page it was all very wonderful but very unintelligible.

To a youth of the poetic temperament, who has once or twice plunged in the ocean of thought, but who stands shivering on the verge of the ocean of life, there is no developing power like that of a beautiful and brilliant woman, older than himself, learned in the world's ways. The bright-winged butterfly, which one well might deem a mere caprice of beauty amid summer's pageant, has its uses in the world, and bears fertility to many an unnoticed flower which otherwise would never grow to fruit. Even so, the butterfly fancies of Claudia fertilised the restless imagination of Stephen Langton. He learnt from her something of the brilliant life of the supreme society in a great capital. He heard from her piquant lips sketches of men and women of renown, men and women whose fame was unknown in stagnant Idlechester. She knew the great poet, had chatted with the great statesman, had flirted with the famous philosopher, had been the daring heresiarch's partner in the Lancers. To Stephen all this was an apocalypse. To our sweet Anne Page it was an enigma as unsolvable as the epitaph on Ælia Lælia Crispis.

And just at this time it happened that Anne had scanty time to try and understand, for Mr. Page had another visitor—his mother. The old lady resided in the North, and was averse to travel, but she had taken a sudden fancy to see her grandchild, and arrived at Idlechester within a very few days of Claudia Branscombe. Anne's grandmamma monopolised her; whence it happened that Miss Branscombe and Stephen were thrown very much together. Both enjoyed it. Claudia liked the innocent, unspoilt freshness of the boy's poetic mind; while Stephen derived a startling stimulus from Claudia's suggestive conversation. He hardly knew himself; he felt like the aloe, whose century's sleep is succeeded by a sudden floral development, consummate and colossal. He found himself forming opinions where heretofore he had doubted, and measuring his own capacities with the capacities of men whose greatness he had deemed vaguely gigantic, and panting to join the hot conflict from which hitherto he had shrunk in dismay. As yet his fair ideal had been a calm life in this sleepy old cathedral city, with sweet Anne Page to lay her loving cheek by his, and dwell with him peacefully.

He had felt, with Tennyson's eaters of the lotos—

"There is no joy but calm!"

But now there came upon him, sudden, strong, irresistible, the wandering spirit of Odysseus; he longed to see many cities of men, and to know their manners; the charmed song of the Sirens breathed itself upon the wind which reached him from those shores remote; he pined for the perilous fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

I am afraid he almost forgot sweet Anne Page—pretty little plump innocent ignorant Anne, in dutiful and affectionate attendance on her doting old grandmamma. He and Claudia were inseparable. It had long been his wont to spend almost his whole day at Mr. Page's during the vacation. So he used to come across to breakfast, and after breakfast to stroll with Claudia in the beautiful gardens or beneath the great cathedral's icy shadow; and after lunch to drive her on some pleasant road in Mr. Page's quiet phaeton, very different vehicle from that fast tandem-cart to which he had clung in his boyhood; and after dinner again to loiter with her through the dim garden alleys, odorous and cool. Of course there were days when this delicious monotony was interrupted. Claudia had to go to dinners and evening parties, and to keep up her acquaintance with Mrs. Bythesea and other fair friends; but Stephen had, on the whole, a very joyous tranquil time during those sultry summer days, and its result upon him was wonderful. Morally and intellectually *he came of age.*

Years after the remembrance of that halcyon time was dear to

him, and he celebrated it in sonorous Spenserian stanzas, whereof I quote the last only :—

> "Could I arrest swift Time upon his flight,
> And from his seat drag down the Charioteer
> Never yet weary, this same golden light
> Should always brood on woodland, wold and mere—
> Always this perfect climax of the year
> Should fill poetic breasts with endless mirth—
> Always the white sky should be tempest-clear—
> And, like a sea on which no storms have birth,
> Summer should always sleep upon the shores of earth."

Now, although all Idlechester was of opinion that Stephen Langton was a mere boy, and a very silly insignificant boy. it could not pass by without remarking his intimacy with Miss Branscombe. Claudia herself, having dined one day at the palace, when the Bishop was in London attending the House, received a slight lecture from Mrs. Bythesea on the subject. Bishops' wives of necessity grow grave and decorous more rapidly than other women; and I verily believe, with all Claudia's daring, she would not now have ventured to throw her friend upon a bed and tickle her. But she wasn't going to stand lecturing, at any rate.

"Look here, Cis," she said in reply, "flirtation is my profession. When I come down to this dull place I just flirt with a good-looking boy to keep my hand in; it doesn't hurt him, and it pleases me. What do I, who have lived in London, care for the empty scandal of a wretched little country place like Idlechester?"

"But really, my dear" ——

"But really, my dear," interrupted Claudia with impetuous mockery, "you have grown into quite a lecturing old woman. You're not half such fun as you were ten years ago. I shall do just as I like, Cis, and if you don't bother I won't quarrel with you; and if you do, I declare I'll make love to the Bishop when he comes back, and you know he couldn't resist me, and you'd cry your eyes out with jealousy."

Mrs. Bythesea was the only person who dared say a word to Claudia, but Stephen got chaffed by several members of his family. His cousin Charles had grown up a provincial dandy, awkward and smart; his cousin Henry, Uncle Tom's eldest son, had developed into vulgarity and dissipation. Each of these young gentlemen had his jest about Stephen's being sweet upon Miss Branscombe; but Stephen (who, you see, was improving) declared he would horsewhip the next who said a word to him on the subject, and they were silent. He could not, however, horsewhip Aunt Harriet, who one day denounced Claudia's conduct as shockingly improper. Stephen, cunning rascal, promptly replied—

"I wonder you don't tell my grandfather what you think of her, Aunt Harriet."

That amiable lady knew better.

Walking down the High Street in search of amusement that afternoon—for it was one of those on which Claudia had an engagement—he loitered into a bookseller's shop. There he met Humphrey Morfill, looking at the London papers. They left arm-in-arm, and Humphrey said—

"You look savage, Stephen. What's the matter?"

"Oh, I don't know—people are such fools. That absurd aunt of mine has just been abusing Claudia—Miss Branscombe, I mean—just because she doesn't find my company very stupid."

"Well," said Morfill, "from all I hear you and she are pretty thick. I don't suppose you'll fall in love with a woman old enough to be—I won't say your mother, but your aunt—though she is deucedly pretty; still when two people are inseparable there's sure to be gossip. And, if I may ask, do you call her Claudia when you're talking to her?"

"I believe I do," said Stephen with some hesitation. "But there are such a lot of consonants in Miss Branscombe."

"Egad! that's good. Come, let's have a drop of seltzer and brandy at Winslow's. It's atrociously thirsty weather."

I don't think Stephen had been at the Half Moon since the day on which Claudia arrived. Jack Winslow received him with a very low curtsey indeed, and asked him when the marriage was to come off.

"There, you see, Humphrey," he said savagely.

"Take care, Jack, or you'll get into difficulties with this young gentleman; he's fierce this morning."

"Well, but," said she, "I'm not to blame if people talk when they see a fine couple preparing for the parson. I must listen, you know."

"Go and get the seltzer, Jack," said Morfill, "or there'll be mischief done. Oh, here's Winslow. I say, landlord, that daughter of yours is getting saucy; you don't keep the whip hand of her."

The Hebe of the Half Moon re-entered with the icy nectar.

"I don't mean any harm, Mr. Stephen, you know," said she good-naturedly.

"Oh yes, I know that; but I'm tired of such foolish gossip."

"There's plenty of it going," said Humphrey; "why, Jack, I heard that you were sweet on little Tranter, the druggist's apprentice."

As Stephen, having parted from his friend, strolled homeward alone, he bitterly reflected on the immense mass of vulgarity and stupidity in the world. Sensitive and dreamy natures, easily excited, are easily depressed. In Mr. Page's Elysian gardens, with Claudia's low voice in his ears, or Anne's brown eyes fixed upon his own, Stephen experienced delight ineffable; but the

empty folly of this afternoon's gossip proportionately tortured him. He loved Anne Page, he said to himself—yes, certainly he loved Anne Page; and he was charmed by the wisdom and wit of Claudia Branscombe; but what was either the one or the other to his stupid cousins, to Aunt Harriet, to that impudent Jack Winslow?

And then he thought, how soon it must end! To go back in a week or ten days to Mr. Hooper's, at Eastford, and his old monotonous grind. Was he to do this, after Claudia's stimulant converse? Was he to turn away from the great movement of the world, of which she had given him brilliant glimpses, and subside into teaching a little obscure dissenting school? What else could he do? There was literature—but all his literary efforts failed. Humphrey Morfill could sit down and write exactly the sort of magazine article that an editor wanted; he couldn't. He felt helpless, powerless, in the hands of the Parcæ. Those grim old ladies who rule the destinies of men held him as firmly in their grip as Aunt Harriet used to in those days when his greatest dread was her avenging rod. Surely the Moiræ were the maiden aunts of mythology.

> "We look before and after,
> And pine for what is not,"

sings the divine lyrist. The ever-forgotten and ever-recurring lesson of time is that what we dread seldom happens, but that evils unforeseen take its place. And yet men will persist in torturing themselves about an uncertain future; in adding imaginary vexations to the real annoyances of the world. Here was Stephen worrying himself about silly rumours—about Eastford, whither (though he little imagined it) he was never to go again—and the real calamity at that moment impending, with all its train of misfortunes, was wholly undreamt of. But the next morning brought the news—

Mr. Page was dead.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. PAGE'S WILL.

ALGERNON PAGE died of disease of the heart, a malady for whose fatal ending he had long been prepared. His loss was felt at Idlechester. Of immense advantage to country towns is the residence of men of culture, who stand aside from the main grooves of ambitious life, and steadfastly and silently follow their favourite pursuits. Time was, within the remembrance of many of us, that certain cities—notably York and Bath—had certain

famous names connected with them. As a consequence such cities had a society devoid of that *provincialism* which Mr. Matthew Arnold denounces; and those whom necessity compelled to reside there, were greatly benefited by the refined and classical atmosphere of the upper social stratum. But now, scarcely a great writer or artist can be named who is not a Londoner, or a dweller in a home county, so that London may be accessible to him; whence the society in country towns sinks to the level of those residents whom occupation keeps there. Even Edinburgh feels the centralising power, the centripetal force—and Messrs. Blackwood have settled quietly down next door to Messrs. Longman, and the chief Scottish periodicals, from the *Edinburgh Review* to *Chambers's Journal*, are published in London.

In this way, Mr. Page's loss was felt in Idlechester. Of good birth and easy fortune, with high scientific rank, his social reserve had not prevented him from exercising much quiet influence. Great men in his own special line were his frequent visitors. His incomparable gardens attracted others, who knew nothing of scientific botany, but could appreciate floral beauty. Perfectly independent, above ducal insult or episcopal patronage or decano-capital intrigue, he set a rare and profitable example of an unostentatious yet liberal and thoughtful life.

How can any pen describe the terrible grief which his death caused sweet Anne Page to suffer? It was perhaps the worst time for this child, already motherless, to lose her father. Just on the verge of womanhood, she had especial need of the guidance which he alone could have given. Hers was sorrow beyond words. Claudia found herself powerless to console her poor little cousin.

Mr. Page, knowing his precarious tenure of life, had made his will years before, and left it in Mr. Drax's custody. That gentleman, and Ralph and Walter Branscombe, were named Anne's trustees. She was directed to reside in the house at Idlechester until she came of age, unless her marriage occurred before that time, and a thousand a year was set aside for her maintenance during her minority. A sealed document accompanied the will, and was not to be opened until her coming of age, unless she should marry before that time, when it was to be read immediately after the ceremony. Funded property producing five hundred a year was left to Stephen Langton. Legacies of a thousand pounds each went to the three trustees; and if Anne died unmarried before the age of twenty-one, two-thirds of the property went to Ralph Branscombe, of Branscombe, esquire, and the remainder to the Reverend Walter Branscombe. The whole amount disposed of by the will was about four thousand a year.

I suppose Stephen Langton was more surprised than anybody else at his good fortune. He knew that his benefactor was willing to give him his daughter, but he did not know that in his

thoughtful kindness he would also give him independence. It was the very gift he needed. It saved him from the necessity of sordid toil, and strengthened him to act with courage when courage was requisite. It is very contemptible, doubtless, but poverty too often makes social cowards of the best of us. Stephen could now isolate himself from the weary vulgarities of his relations. There are always quaint corners of a Cathedral town where the peaceful and picturesque mingle. Stephen found old-fangled apartments in a dark polygonal old house in a queer trapezium called Little College Green. There he took up his abode in a suite of three rooms, all on the ground floor. The front room looked on the green, and was long and narrow; the two back rooms occupied the same space, in length, as the front, and gave on a garden such as one sees in ecclesiastical towns, and nowhere else. A garden where the scandent plants have stems as thick as a man's leg, and the ivy is a monster of vegetation; and there are two or three apple-trees, mossy, gnarled, decrepit, bearing few fruit, but of such quality as Covent Garden never knows, notwithstanding its monastic name. Stephen had besides a dark deep fish-pond, with two or three enormous carp in it that came to him for bread crumbs. He used one of these back rooms as a bedroom; the other, accessible only through the bed-room, was devoted to his books and his cigars. For these bachelor quarters he paid half a guinea a week; which was thought rather a high price in Idlechester, in those days before railways. He could not at this time see much of Anne Page, who had naturally fallen into the hands of her relations, Claudia, and Winifred, and Winifred's father. So he wrote a little, and studied a little, and dreamt much of that distant wondrous world whose existence Claudia Branscombe had revealed to him.

Meanwhile Mr. Drax had made a communication to the Rev. Walter Branscombe, and that excellent clergyman desired to pass it on to his brother. But how? Claudia had no idea where her father was. Devil Branscombe did not believe that girls could keep secrets, so he kept his own. Raphael might know; but where was Raphael? But her father had told her that, if she wanted to communicate with him on anything important, she was to send to the *Times* this advertisement—

"*Good morning, Papa!*"

It was some time before she recollected this direction; when she thought of it she did it at once, and a day or two brought her a letter from her father, telling her to address him, "L. M. N., Post Office, Guernsey." So she wrote, enclosing a note from her uncle; and the consequence was that the brothers arranged a meeting at the Dolphin Hotel, Southampton.

In a bow-windowed room on the first floor of that fine old hostelry, from which you could look up and down Southampton's

long, busy, picturesque High Street, Devil Branscombe met his clerical brother. You can always get a good bottle of wine at the Dolphin, and there stood between them a claret-jug, holding excellent Chateau-Lafitte. And thus they conversed:

"I told Drax not to pay over that thousand pounds to your account at Coutts's, not knowing how you might stand there," said Walter.

"I don't think you often make a mistake. My account must be a good deal overdrawn. The thousand will be useful for immediate expenses."

"So I thought, and brought it with me in notes. Claudia doesn't want any money just now. She's been living for nothing at poor Page's, and her own little income is quite enough for her."

"What in the world made Page leave young Langton anything?"

"Langton is engaged to his daughter—a mere baby—only sixteen; we can do anything with her."

"What do you propose to do?"

"Listen a moment. Drax"—here the Rector dropped his voice involuntarily—"Drax has told me the contents of that sealed codicil. It leaves the whole property in this way: If Langton and the little girl are married half of it is settled on each of them. The same thing is to take place if she declines to marry him. But, if he declines to marry her, she gets the whole property?"

"Is the codicil valid, do you think?"

"Well, if not, it is no good for us to upset it, as of course the child would then get everything unconditionally."

"I don't see anything to be done," said Ralph Branscombe meditatively.

"I do," said the Rector. "That boy showed symptoms of being taken with Claudia. What if she were to marry him?"

"What good would that be? It would leave the little girl independent."

"But suppose Raphael were to marry *her*? I should think he would have no difficulty."

"By Jove! I shouldn't have thought of that arrangement. Well, what do you want *me* to do?"

"Write to Claudia; or, better still, see her, and tell her to marry young Langton. She has fascinated him already, I fancy."

"My Claudia's too good for the young lout," said Devil Branscombe. "But it seems a fine combination. I ought to see her to explain it to her. I tell you what—leave it to me—I'll come to Idlechester."

"Is it safe?" asked the Rector.

"No; that's the fun of it. If it was, I wouldn't come. I'll manage the affair."

A few days later than this, as old Langton the tanner, in the

dusk of evening, was looking round the tanyard, he became aware of a tall man on the other side of the brook. Rather to his surprise, the stranger splashed across the shallow stream, and coming up to him, said—

"Well, Langton, how are you?"

"Why, it's the Squire!" exclaimed the old tanner in astonishment.

"Ay, my old friend, here I am," said Devil Branscombe. "And now, will you do me a good turn? Get me quietly into your house, and let me sleep there a couple of nights, without a word said to anybody. Will you?"

"I shall have to tell one of the women folk, Squire—my daughter Harriet. She's so cursed sharp, she'd be sure to find it out; but she won't split. And there's the spare bedroom looking out on the street; you might be there a twelvemonth and nobody know. None of the maids go there; only Harriet."

"That will do capitally," said Ralph. "I'll trust any daughter of yours, my old friend. But how shall I get in?"

"That's just what I must get Harriet to manage," said the tanner.

And Harriet managed it extremely well.

The "best bedroom," an immense chamber on the first floor, occupying half the width of the house, had not been tenanted within the memory of this generation. But to have used it for any other purpose would have been sacrilege. It was the pride of Aunt Harriet's heart. She gave it periodical dustings, and kept it always in as good order as if she expected a visit from the Queen. And as she never, except at lustrations, allowed any one but herself to enter it, it was a perfect place of concealment for Devil Branscombe. Here he found himself that evening, with wax-candles burning, and the best bed—a great bed of Ware, almost—prepared for his reception. And, when everybody else was in bed, Aunt Harriet brought up for him a copious supper—an uncut ham and an enormous home-made loaf, and a mighty tankard of her father's ale. He rather enjoyed his position. It was a curious change after rusticating in Guernsey, an island more picturesque than social, where he smoked on the pier all day and played loo or billiards at the club all night. Here, snugly hidden, he looked down upon the familiar High Street of Idlechester, and upon the house in which his brother-in-law died. He saw Stephen Langton call to inquire for his sweetheart in the early forenoon, and turn sadly away when told that she did not feel well enough to see him. He saw the Reverend Walter and his pious daughter, Winifred, enter the house; and by-and-by he saw the Rector go away again, Winifred remaining. He saw Claudia come out for a stroll, beautiful as ever in her sable attire, and little dreaming that her father's eyes were upon her. He saw scores of faces that he knew, and criticised the changes time had brought them. And so amused was he at his whimsical

position, that he wrote a long letter to Raphael (who was at Venice), describing all that he saw, and fully explaining the Rector's subtle schemes.

Not till the second day did he decide to act. Then he requested Aunt Harriet to communicate cautiously to Miss Branscombe that she wanted to speak to her.

"Don't say a word to her about me. Bring her up here at once. Won't she be astonished! But if she screams, by the Lord Harry, I'll forfeit a ten pound note."

Miss Harriet Langton acted on her instructions, and Claudia, considerably surprised, walked across the street, and was shown into the parlour—a room little altered since we first knew it, except that there was no bright-eyed boy dreaming at one window, no oracular old lady knitting at the other. Old Mrs. Langton was dead. Being asked to walk upstairs, Claudia could scarcely do less than comply; and she certainly was rather amazed to find her father comfortably sitting in one of those vast bedroom easy-chairs which arrided our ancestors. Aunt Harriet left them alone.

"Lock the doors, Claudia," said Ralph Branscombe. "You look surprised to see me. I came over from Guernsey on purpose to have a talk to you."

"I'm very glad to see you, papa," she said, seating herself opposite to him. "You are looking uncommonly well."

"Yes, I don't wear badly, and I've been very quiet lately. But we must talk of business, child; I think you can do a good thing for us all."

"I am ready to try," she said; "but I hope it doesn't involve playing écarté, for that's a thing I never could do properly."

"I want you to marry that young Langton."

"*What!*" she said, "why, he's a mere boy, papa."

"So much the easier to manage. But come, what difference is there between you? seven or eight years, perhaps. It is a mere trifle—and you don't look above twenty, really."

"You flatter, Mr. Branscombe. But what good should I do by marrying him? He's only got five hundred a year."

"That's not the point. We have discovered the nature of that sealed paper of Page's. If Langton marries your little cousin, they are to have all the property; and if she should refuse him, each is to have half; but if he declines to have her, she gets the whole."

"Well, I don't see."

"Why, if you get hold of young Langton, Raphael can marry the girl."

"Oh, indeed. Well, it's a brilliant idea—Uncle Walter's, I guess. Let me think—if I marry Stephen, we shall have about seven hundred a year between us, which isn't much. Then he's a mere boy; why, I remember saving him from being whipped when he was a child at school. Still, he's good-looking, and he

might be obedient. Well, then, Raphael is to marry Anne. Will he? And will she have him? I don't think she'd break her heart about Stephen, and I believe anybody could marry her who chose to try. But are you sure about Raphael, papa?"

"One can't be sure about anything; but if he isn't compromised elsewhere, I fancy he'll do it. I have written to him to meet me as soon as I get away from here."

"And you want to get away at once, of course, because it is dangerous. Well, I'll sacrifice myself, if Stephen will have me. He's a nice boy after all."

"How long will it take you to land him?" asked her father, in angler's phrase.

"A month or two, perhaps. What shall you do in the meantime?"

"Go to Baden, I think, and try a new martingale. Poor Page's thousand will last some little time, as of course I shan't pay any debts."

"But, papa, if Raphael marries Anne, won't it be possible to make things square, and live quietly again? You must be dreadfully weary of this hide and seek."

"We'll try what can be done," he replied. "I think my wild oats ought to be nearly sown."

Claudia left him, and he watched her cross the street to Mr. Page's. He stood looking thoughtfully out of the window for some time, and by and by noticed a stout seedy man pass slowly up the pavement, giving what seemed a significant glance at the opposite house. He was just the sort of man one associates with writs, and Devil Branscombe felt an uneasy sensation. The man was followed at some distance by two other men; one of these looked like an Essex or Salisbury Street lawyer; the other Ralph Branscombe knew too well. He was a shrewd and resolute officer who had been in pursuit of him for a year or two.

"By Jove," he said to himself, "those beggars have traced me somehow. How the deuce have they managed it? Luckily they don't seem to guess I'm here. I'm glad Claudia was safe across before they could see her."

At that moment he started; for his door, which he had not locked after Claudia, was suddenly opened, but the person who entered was only old Langton.

"There are sharks abroad, Squire," he said. "I've just seen Laurie, the Sheriff's officer, looking very knowingly at Page's house; and two other fellows followed him, and they went away together. I was standing at the gate, and saw them. The others are London chaps, I guess."

"I saw them, Langton, and know who they are. How shall I get away? They'll watch all the coaches."

"I've got an idea, Squire. There's a night mail that passes the cross roads a way towards Eastford about two in the morning. It goes right over the downs to Salisbury. It's fourteen miles,

about; my mare 'll do it easy in an hour and a quarter. Shall I drive you over to-night?"

"The very thing," he replied. "We can start after your people are in bed. It won't do to go from the High Street, though."

"No," said Langton, "I thought of that. We can have the trap down in the back lane, and walk across the tanyard."

"But how will you get the mare round there? And who'll be in charge of her till we come?"

"Ah," replied the tanner, "that's a puzzler. I can't trust her with everybody, and besides, any giddy boy won't do."

After a pause, he resumed—

"I think I see what to do. The mare and trap are in the Half Moon stables luckily; I left them there when I drove in with a commercial the other day. I'll manage it, Squire, never fear."

Away went the loyal old tanner to the Half Moon, and called for ale. Jack Winslow served him, looking as piquant as ever.

"Jack," he said, "you're not timorsome, I know. I want you to take out my mare and trap to-night at a quarter-past twelve, and drive down to Lane End, and wait for me and a friend. You must do it all yourself, and not say a word to anybody before or after. It's a matter of life and death almost. You're not afraid?"

"Not likely. I'll do it. It will be a jolly lark. I'll be there to a minute. You won't have the lamps, I suppose?"

"No, certainly not. And if anybody interferes with you down there"——

"He won't interfere with anybody else for some time. Don't be afraid for me, Mr. Langton. I can take care of myself."

The tanner was on tenter hooks till his family were gone to bed that night. But they were all off in capital time; and he and Ralph, after a stiff glass of brandy and water, made their way into the tanyard at the hour appointed. There was neither moon nor stars, and it was pitch-dark.

"Keep right behind me, Squire, and put your hand on my shoulder. There are lots of pits about here, but I know my way blindfold."

A tanyard is not a nice place to walk in at nights, the pits being divided by very narrow pathways, awkward enough by daylight, while the lime pits, in which the hair is scorched from the hides, are so surrounded by a white deposit, that when quite full, they can hardly be distinguished from the firm earth around them. As the two men advanced along a path so strewn with soft tan that their footsteps gave no sound, Langton became suddenly aware of a light moving in front of them. He stood still for a moment. It was evidently a lantern.

"I verily believe those villains are prowling about here, Squire. What can they be after at this time of night?"

"Perhaps they want to find some place to hide and keep watch," whispered Ralph.

"I'll be hanged if I can make it out. But come along quietly, and be ready for a row. We shall have to meet them, they're right in our way."

The lantern which the approaching party carried carefully in front of them served to expose them to Ralph and the tanner. There were two men only, who turned out to be the lawyer and the London officer. Laurie, the local man, was not interested enough in the capture to undertake midnight reconnoissances. They carried their light low, and stooped as they walked to make out the path, and did not notice any one approaching till the tanner collared one of them with his strong right hand, and exclaiming—

"Thieves, by Jingo!" swung the unlucky intruder into the nearest tanpit. The lantern was smashed; the other man was so affrighted by his perplexing position that he went down on his hands and knees, groping for the path; and Langton and Branscombe, kicking him out of the way, pushed forward down the hill, crossed the brook, and were soon at Lane End.

"That poor devil won't be drowned, I hope," said Ralph.

"Drowned, no!" said Langton. "He'll be tanned, though. There isn't much stuff in that pit, but I doubt if he'll get out till the morning, unless the other rascal has sense enough to help him."

"I expect he'll be afraid to move," said Ralph. "It's a deuced awkward trap to be caught in. Your men will probably find them both there in the morning."

Which turned out to be the case. You have probably never fallen into a tanpit, reader. I have, and I assure you it is not nice. It was the lawyer who got in, and there he was found at about half-past six, up to his armpits in tan. The bailiff, more fortunate, had scrambled to the sloping side of a bark stack, where he had slept, but he had not strength enough to get his companion out, and so they had to wait till the men came to work. Everybody roared with laughter at the professional gentleman's plight; but the old tanner told him it would do him good, substituting a healthier smell for the bad odour observable in low attorneys. He had a great mind, he said, to give them into custody for trespassing, and on suspicion of theft.

Ralph and his guide found the trap standing at Lane End, the mare now and then giving an impatient stamp of her forefoot. Jack Winslow jumped out, and it was not so dark that Devil Branscombe could not recognise a petticoat.

"By Jove! Langton," he said, "why, who's this?"

"You know her well enough, Squire; it's Jack Winslow."

"Egad," he exclaimed, "you *are* a trump, Jack; I must give you a kiss for this. Why, there isn't another girl in England would have had the pluck to do it."

So Ralph Branscombe pressed the buxom barmaid's lips, and sprang into the trap, and away went the mare with that long swinging trot into which the tanner broke the animals he drove. Meanwhile Jack Winslow walked fearlessly up the lane, and through the stable entrance to the Half-Moon, and found her way to her bedchamber.

"I didn't think it was the Squire," she said to herself while disrobing. "Well, he's a gentleman every inch, though they do say he's so wild, and he's just the man I'd marry, if he was young enough and would have me."

How these wild men fascinate women of all sorts!

"I'm well out of that, Langton," said Ralph, as the mare went merrily along.

"Yes; they were on the scent, evidently. Downright fools to come into the yard by night, though. I suppose those Londoners had never seen a tanyard before."

"They won't want to see another," said Ralph, laughing. "What a thorough trump that little Winslow girl is! I gave her a kiss, but I'd have given her a handful of guineas if I'd thought she'd take them."

"You'd have mortally offended her," said the tanner. "Send her some trifle when you're safe—a bit of your hair in a locket, or some such truck, and she'll be delighted."

"I will," said Branscombe—and he did.

A night drive in fine weather is always pleasant, and is peculiarly exhilarating when you have just succeeded in eluding some imminent evil—when you feel safe and free after long suspense. So Branscombe and Langton were in high glee when they reached the cross roads. The mare had gone like the wind; it wasn't half-past one, and the mail came by at two. They knocked up the landlord of the little inn, and the kitchen fire was resuscitated, and something hot and strong prepared Ralph Branscombe for his ride over the great plain. Oh those old country inns, with their generous kitchens, their strong home-brewed ale, their great flitches always ready to be sliced and broiled, their fresh eggs, their wholesome neat-handed waitresses! Steam has annihilated them; and I am one of those who find no consolation in the gaudy coffee-rooms of the Magnificent Hotel (Limited).

But there are the lamps of the Salisbury mail.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PANTHER'S WOOING.

CLAUDIA had undertaken a task of double difficulty—difficult for Stephen, difficult for herself. Perhaps she rather underestimated the difficulty, so far as Stephen was concerned. He was a boy, she thought, and boys are seldom true to their first love fancy; and surely she was far more bewitching than that little Anne Page. But she looked her own difficulty fairly in the face; she was old enough to know her own need; she required, as old Langton had said to himself ten years before, a *man* to rule her; she was well aware that a miserable life awaited her if she married a person her inferior in strength of will, in force of character. She should have her own way in such a case; but she did not want her own way; she wanted to be obliged to accept the way of a man she worshipped, a man she loved and feared, a man at whose feet she crouched, a very tame submissive panther indeed. Knowing all this, she felt that the sacrifice she contemplated making for her father was of no common magnitude.

I venture to think that the neoteric novelist is generally a trifle too fond of little girls. I mean—don't be offended, young ladies—children of eighteen or nineteen, infantile heroines, who are very pretty, and fresh, and nice, but who can by no possibility have any definite character. Watch, as I have watched, a girl's development from seventeen to twenty-seven, and say if from her peculiarities at the former age it is possible to judge what she will be at the latter. It is hard to understand why pretty creatures fresh from the nursery are perpetually chosen as heroines. They are seldom such in real life, and it would be a dreadful bore if they were. Only boys and foolish elderly men think of marrying girls of eighteen or thereabout. Perhaps the truth is that the woman in her young prime—the woman in that delicious decade which begins at twenty-five—is rather too difficult a subject for the average novelist. So he gives us lamb instead of four-year-old mutton.

Claudia tried hard to persuade herself, in direct contravention of her own judgment, that it would give her satisfaction to have a husband who would do her will unreasoningly. And such a spouse she expected in Stephen. That word "*obey*," which our wise liturgists put into the mouth of the marrying maiden, is a great trial to womankind. They know by instinct that it is what they ought to do to be happy; yet they shrink from it as a timorous bather shrinks from his header into the sea on a cool fresh October morning. Shy creatures, whether panthers or

fawns, they fly from the hand of their master; yet to be mastered is their destiny, their felicity.

Having decided to sacrifice herself for the good of the Branscombes, Claudia perceived the necessity of so occupying Anne Page that she might not monopolise Stephen. So she encouraged him to bring his friend Humphrey Morfill to the house; and Humphrey was both useful and ornamental. Humphrey was quite the modern Admirable Crichton. He could do anything. He went in for winning a fellowship and a lady's hand in precisely the same business-like way. He knew how to talk. In brilliant verbal foil-play with Claudia he achieved great success; but he showed a preference for teaching pretty little Anne a few innocent elements of the science called knowledge of the world. So the two couples paired off, a good deal; Claudia instructress to Stephen, Humphrey ludimagister to Anne. We must watch both processes.

In time Stephen had nearly exhausted Claudia's information of that world-stratum called society. He was apprehensive, as I have said; and, having apprehended, he began to exercise his forgetive faculty. He combined the social elements learned from Claudia into dramatic and romantic scenes. Farther, he imagined himself in the untried arena, and felt—the daring young dreamer—as if he need fear no one there. But, as Claudia ceased to teach, she began to learn. What, it may be asked, could this brilliant creature, a social expert, learn of a boy like young Langton? Much. A poet of the day has described a young lady who, being christened Louisa, and being rather fast, has been rechristened "Unlimited Loo," in rhymes like these, so far as I can remember them:—

"Loo's a voice most delicious to carol
  Mr. Tennyson's songs to the harp;
She can manage a light double-barrel;
  She can angle for trout or for carp:
So wisely she talks about science,
  You'd think her a regular blue:
She sets every rule at defiance—
  And we style her Unlimited Loo.

"She can pull a stroke-oar on the river,
  Like that muscular hero, Tom Brown;
She can ride, and at fences don't quiver
  Where many a hunter goes down;
She's plucky, but vastly more pleasant
  Than most of the nursery crew;
She can shoot, dress, and carve a cock pheasant,
  This wilful Unlimited Loo."

Now Claudia had all Miss Loo's accomplishments, and was quite as unlimited; but there was one thing whereof Claudia

had a ladylike ignorance, and that was literature. I don't of course mean contemporary literature—*i.e.*, Tennyson, Tupper, all the new novels, and the *Saturday Review*. She knew nothing of the classical literature of this or any other nation; and here she found a teacher in Stephen. He, being omnivorous, had read Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Ben Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher—had gone farther afield, reading all that is best in the literature of Greece and of Rome—had mastered Spanish, Italian, German, French, and could quote for her Calderon, Camoens, Chiabrera, Goethe, or Heine and Alfred de Musset. I do not mean to say he had scholarly or accurate knowledge of any one of these languages; he had not. But he had, in that apprehensive faculty of his, a power which enabled him to understand great poets more thoroughly than many a perfect scholar. Porson was the victim of false quantities to the last, though he taught us the laws of Greek verse. Peacock, whose algebra has well been styled "The *Ivanhoe* of Cambridge," could not solve an equation problem. Stephen Langton could scarcely write a grammatical phrase in any tongue save English; but he tasted authors as diverse as Aristophanes, Anacreon, Heine, Béranger, with most appreciative palate.

Now Claudia Branscombe's policy was transitive from the brilliant social mood to the Platonic and psychological. And here, as I have said, Stephen was so apt as to astonish her—almost to alarm her. She became rather afraid of the boy's progress being too rapid. Learned in the love-lore of the poets, he was first lecturer and then improvisator. The noble library furnished abundant material. Pleasant mornings of autumn vanished but too swiftly in its easy chairs or out beneath the leafage of the gardens. Let me sketch but one such morning.

Humphrey Morfill had brought Anne Page to that seat beneath the acacia where Stephen had declared himself her lover, and was teaching her chess. It was a most barefaced pretext. Anne couldn't learn the moves, and wouldn't try; her pretty white hands played with the white ivory; her sweet cheek flushed as she listened to Humphrey's gay joyous spirited talk. A capital talker, Humphrey; never dull or taciturn or melancholy, like Stephen; always ready with easy converse that had perhaps very little in it, but was enlivening and effervescent, like the foam of champagne. So they were pretending to play chess, and Humphrey was chattering, and Anne was listening dreamily, delightedly. Where were the other twain?

There was a cool shady seat under the tent-like greenery of a superb plane-tree: "such tents the patriarchs loved." On a mimic lake, tranquil and pellucid, swam a very flotilla of unusual water-fowl, *raræ aves in terris*. The mound on which rose the plane sloped to this lakelet. Claudia sat upon the turf, a volume wide open on her lap. Stephen looked over the fair white page, and with eager finger pointed to the lines—

"Ah! yet doth beauty, like a dial-hand,
Steal from his figure and no pace perceived;
So your sweet hue, which methinks still doth stand,
Hath motion and mine eye may be deceived;
For fear of which, hear this, thou age unbred!
Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead.'

"Very poetic flattery," said Claudia; "but even Shakespeare was too weak for time. The fair face faded. Who was she, I wonder?"

"She is immortal in his verse, at any rate," said Stephen. "But nobody believes that beauty's summer is dead."

"It is melancholy to think that what poor beauty one may have is stealing away every moment just as certainly as the shadow moves on the dial."

"Heraclitus remarked that you never twice cross the same stream or twice look on the same face. Yet," went on Stephen—daring boy!—"you seem to me the very same vision of beauty that dawned upon me at that sordid school."

"Don't talk of it," she interposed hurriedly. "Why, there have been ten April perfumes in ten hot Junes burned since then! I could almost cry, Stephen, when I think how dreadfully old I am growing—and you, why you are just beginning to live."

There certainly was a misty moisture in those wondrous black eyes of hers.

"You are not altered," said Stephen. "I could fancy—I do sometimes fancy—that the whole time is a dream, and that I shall wake up in the morning a little boy, in that snug room at Kingsleat, with your night-dress on. I remember now what wonderful frills it had."

"You were a wicked little boy," she said, turning round upon him with a flash of the liquid black eyes. "What business have you with my night-dresses?"

"Ah!" said Stephen, throwing himself back upon the soft green turf and closing his eyes, "it *is* a dream, I know. I am not on the grass under a plane-tree: I am half asleep in a delicious bed—half asleep, drowsily dozing—and you are going to get into bed in the next room—and before you do, you will stoop over me and give me a kiss. I know you will."

Why, Claudia, Claudia, what can this impudent boy mean? Is he not a trifle too precoce? Is he forgetting sweet Anne Page? Or is it only that facile humour which ever coexists with poetry? A momentous problem.

Claudia looked down upon him. His eyes were closed; the leaf shadows of the plane fluttered over his boyish face; his lips were half parted, expectant. She stooped, and her abundant black tresses showered over him, and she pressed her lips to his. She could not resist the impulse; it was magic, magnetic. He

caught her before she could rise again, and gave her kiss for kiss. Springing to his feet, he laughed merrily, and exclaimed—

"Then come kiss me, sweet-and-twenty."

He could see Claudia blush a rosy red—she who blushed seldom indeed. And Claudia could feel the warm blush tingle and redden through her every limb. What had she done? She was playing with edged tools. She was afraid of this boy, whom hitherto she had regarded with tolerant contempt. She was afraid of herself and of him.

"Sweet-and-thirty, you mean," she said. "Now, you must not do that again, Stephen, or I shall be very angry. You are a naughty boy."

He stooped over her, caught her two hands in his, and looked right into those great black changeful eyes. There was a strange expression in them—an almost piteous expression.

"Why, Claudia," he said, "there is no need to be angry. We went back a few years, that is all. I was a poor little schoolboy again, and you were the kind and beautiful vision that came suddenly to give me one day's pleasure. And you gave me a kiss of your own free will, you must admit."

"You are cruel," she said, looking away from him. "Let me go. I am tired of this child's play."

She rose to her feet, imperious and angry as the virgin goddess, that day the luckless huntsman beheld her white-skinned beauty in the Gargaphian waters. If Claudia had been at this moment a goddess I don't know what might have chanced to Stephen. You see, being very angry with herself, she naturally vented her ire upon him.

"You should go back to school again if I had my way," she said, "and learn better manners. I wonder at your impertinence."

"My dear Miss Claudia," said Stephen, "will you listen for a minute? You are unreasonably angry with yourself for being so generous as to recall old times by giving me a kiss, and so you pretend to be angry with me. Now what harm in the world have you done or have I done? In point of fact you were only kissing a little boy in one of your own night-gowns."

Claudia thought it best to laugh. She knew it was ridiculous to quarrel with Stephen for her own mistake.

"I'll never kiss you again, sir, never," she said.

"Don't make rash promises," replied Stephen. "I really think that in order to console me for the scolding I have had, you ought to give me one more kiss—or at least let me take one. I shan't be able to believe you forgive me, else."

I think I may leave the reader to guess how this overture was received.

Claudia could not for a long time decide whether Stephen had

any touch of feeling towards her. His manner perplexed her. With Anne Page he assumed the rights of betrothal, and tacitly treated her as his future wife, giving her indeed slight lectures, and making suggestions as to her conduct, all which Anne took with sweet submission. But he appeared to prefer Claudia's society, and lost no occasion for a quiet conversation with her, and wrote verses for her, and left Anne Page for Humphrey Morfill to amuse. He, nothing loth, amused her, and little Anne seemed quite content. Winifred tried once or twice to make her jealous of Claudia; but Anne could not feel jealousy.

"He likes Claudia's company," said Anne, "and why shouldn't he enjoy it? We love one another, you know, Stephen and I; but we need not always be talking about it."

"It appears to me," said Winifred, "that neither of you cares about the other. If he runs away with Claudia, I suppose you'll take up with Mr. Morfill."

"Claudia is much too old for Stephen. She is like a mother to him," said Anne, with a touch of demure spitefulness.

Winifred only wanted to make a little mischief. She and her father watched Claudia's game with much interest, and hoped to see her successful; and I suppose, if they had witnessed that scene under the plane-tree, they would have felt certain of her triumph. The Panther felt no such certainty.

When they parted, she went to her room, and kneeling on a stool at the window, looked out upon the garden. There was still upon her cheeks the remnant of that angry blush, like the rosy streaks in the west that mark where the sun went down in splendour. She bit her beautiful nether lip; she clenched on one another her small white hands; her bosom panted beneath her bodice; her great black eyes had a lurid light in them.

"Shall I gain him?" she soliloquised. "I don't know. He is a strange boy, with something about him that I cannot understand. He *made* me kiss him just now. I believe he could do it again, this moment, though I hate him for it. Yes, I *hate* him sometimes. I like him a little now and then; but he *shall* not have such power over me. Why, I could have cried with spite. Oh! if he was only the little puny boy he was when I knew him first, I'd whip him to death almost—I declare I would. Hateful creature! When I marry him he shall pay for all this. I'll make him my slave. *Can I?* I will—I must; he shall submit to my will. To think that this mere boy should be able to make me hate him so. I wonder what Cis would say, if I told her!"

The idea of the Bishop's lady's probable amazement made our Panther laugh. She grew less moody. She bathed her fair cheeks in fragrant water, and cooled away the excitement which had so thrilled every nerve of her body. She looked out upon the garden; Stephen and Humphrey and Anne Page were grouped together by the fountain; Humphrey was throwing

pebbles into the water; Stephen, holding his sweetheart's hand in his, was saying something to which she eagerly listened.

"No; she shall not have him," said the Panther to herself. "I will not be defied by two children. They cannot know what love is."

So through the pleasant autumn weather she did her utmost to charm him. She wasted upon him a myriad times the art which had been triumphant with admirers of far greater pretension. It was a strange game they played—she conscious, Stephen unconscious. Day after day passed delightfully, yet the Panther could not be sure of her prey. His very innocence foiled her—his boyish love for sweet Anne Page—his reverent admiration for herself, reverent, though, as we have seen, chequered with irreverent incidents. And the great term time of Cambridge came rapidly on, when Humphrey Morfill would be away, and her work would be retarded by Anne Page's company. She resolved soon to make some decisive move. It was most important, for her father's sake, to win this game; and, besides, she was now too excited in the pursuit to relinquish it.

Whence it happened that, after much reflection, she fixed upon an evening for that purpose. Eager in her enterprise, she was yet cool and considerate. "This boy," she said to herself, "cannot believe that I really love him, as I want him to believe; he thinks me beyond him; I must prove to him that I am not so. He will fall at my feet and worship me, when once he perceives his good fortune. As yet he is afraid." And so she decided upon time and place, and on a plan of action.

There was a lecture at some Idlechester Institute, by one of those wandering geniuses who skim the froth of other men's minds, and retail it for a few guineas nightly. I rather think it was on chemistry; and sweet Anne Page, having a pretty childish liking for seeing potassium flaming upon ice, and hearing the explosion of oxyhydrogen soap-bubbles, asked Stephen to take her. But Stephen was too busy, he said; the foolish fellow was hard at work on a magazine article, which of course was eventually refused; so he suggested that Humphrey would be glad to go. And thus it was arranged.

Which our wicked Panther knowing, that afternoon in the garden she reminded Stephen of a translation he had promised her of those delicious verses of Chiabrera's—

> "Belle rose porporine,
> Che tra spine
> Sull' aurora non aprite:
> Ma ministre degli Amori,
> Bei testori
> Di bei denti custodite."

Cunning as Eve her progenitrix, mother and mistress of many tricks, she knew well that the young scribbler could not refuse

her his rhymes, whensoever she desired them; and so she desired them this very evening. And so, when Humphrey had taken Anne away to their chemistry, Stephen arrived with his MS., and began with more fluency than felicity—

"Ruddy Roses! not the blossoms
Whose sweet bosoms
Morning wets with crystal dew;
But lip-roses
Where reposes
Love, and music trembles through!"

And of course the Panther's lustrous eyes brightened with admiration; and of course he read more of his polyglottisms, all about love—leave the boy alone for that. But by and by Claudia interrupted the readings with—

"Stephen, how old is Anne Page?"

"In her seventeenth year," he said.

"And when are you going to marry her?"

"That," he replied, "depends on her guardians. If Mr. Page had lived, he would doubtless have wished her to wait a few years."

"And you are in no hurry?"

"Why should I be? We are both very young. It would be wrong to hurry her. She is scarcely old enough to know her own mind?"

"Are *you?*" asked Claudia with some emphasis.

"Well," he said, rising from his seat, and walking up and down the room, "I think I am. You know I have been in love with her for ten years at least," he continued, with a light laugh.

"Stephen," she said, with a very low inflection of her most musical voice, "Stephen, do not make a mistake in this matter. Do not mistake a mere childish fancy for true love. You young poets rhyme about true love without dreaming of its marvellous power. Oh! it is something so delicious that the delight is on the very verge of agony. It is too divine for us to enjoy it fully, and that is why its course can never run smooth. The gods envy those who love. Be careful, Stephen."

"Why, Claudia," he said, astonished at her vehemence, "have you ever known true love, then?"

"Shall I tell you a great secret, Stephen? No," she said, playfully putting her pretty finger to her lip, "no, you cannot be trusted. No, I won't tell you."

"You may trust me," he said. "I should very much like to know that there is any one whom *you* think worth loving."

"Oh! there is," she said; "there is."

There was a pause. At length she said—

"Come here, Stephen. Kneel down. I don't want you to look at me while I tell you my secret."

He knelt at her feet, and buried his face in her lap, as if they were playing forfeits. She ran her delicate fingers through his bright crisp curly hair. He was very patient. At last she said—

"I am afraid. Can't you guess, Stephen?"

"I can only guess that he is a very happy man," he answered, trying to raise his head and look at her face. But she would not let him.

"He is too happy," she said, "too fortunate. He cares nothing for me. Oh, I cannot tell you, Stephen!"

"How you delight to tantalise me," he said.

"Listen, Stephen, listen," she whispered. "Tell nobody. Forget that you have heard it." She bowed her head towards him, so that he felt her breath upon his hair. "*It is you I love!*"

Still she held him in his sweet prison; then, as with a sudden revulsion, she pushed him from her, saying—

"Go away—you despise me, I know—go away directly."

She buried her face in her hands, and sobbed passionately.

Stephen was astounded. With all her apparent passion, he could not believe her. He had never dreamt of loving Claudia, of being unfaithful to sweet Anne Page. He was thunderstruck, yet scarcely credulous.

"Claudia," he said, "what have you told me?"

"Stephen," she replied, standing erect, and looking upon him fearlessly, with dilated orbs of living light, "I have told you the truth. I am foolish enough, wicked enough, to love you, though I know you can never love me. Perhaps you some day will love as madly, and then you will know how vain it is to strive to repress such love. O Stephen, Stephen, my darling, pity me!"

She threw herself upon him. She flung her arms around him wildly, and clung to him, lip, breast, and lissom limb. She kissed him as Cleopatra might have kissed broad-fronted Cæsar in her youth. He could not help returning the pressure of that irresistible embrace. For a half-minute, it may be, locked in each other's arms, Stephen and Claudia forgot, or seemed to forget, everything but love. So Hero and Leander may have clung together ere the bold swimmer sprang into Hellespont on his return.

But the Panther felt that she had not triumphed. She had miscalculated her power over him. And she was not surprised, when that vehement embrace was over, to hear him say—

"Claudia, this is very terrible. I pity you."

Yes, this was her humiliation, only too well deserved, she felt. She had vainly exhausted all her resources, even those which no woman should stoop to use. She had offered herself to this boy, and was rejected. Even the secret might not be kept; he and Anne Page perhaps would talk of her with a pitying smile as "poor Claudia." Her haughty temper chafed at the numberless probabilities which crowded her imagination. If Raphael should

hear of it! Raphael would believe Stephen to blame—would call him to account; and what would he say to her? Oh, that she had never run such a risk! Oh, that she had never taken a fancy to this contemptuous boy years before!

"I wish I could love you, Claudia," he went on, breaking the silence, "I owe you a great debt of gratitude."

This was worse than all. Every word he uttered, though intended kindly, filled her with deeper shame, with hotter ire. She bit her lip till it bled; she clenched her beautiful hands till the nails indented their soft palms. She would have given half her life at that moment to be revenged upon Stephen. Oh, to torture him with some intense ingenuity of torture—something beyond all that the Inquisition ever invented!

Humphrey Morfill's knock was heard at the front door.

"Tell them I have a headache—anything," she said, and was gone in an instant.

So Stephen told them he had called in to hear their account of the lecture, and that Miss Branscombe had a bad headache; and Anne Page ran away to see if she could do anything for her cousin; and Humphrey criticised the lecturer's theories, and laughed at the awkwardness of his experiments, and was learned upon isomeric substances; and by and by Anne returned to say that Claudia was coming presently, and they must stop to supper, which they did; and Humphrey Morfill announced his intention of performing a chemical experiment superior to any at the lecture, and accordingly, being furnished with a lobster and some anchovies and olives and capers and lettuce and endives and various condiments, made such a salad as only a first-rate operator could produce.

Claudia came down looking radiant, and supper went off with joyous gaiety.

"Chemistry," said Humphrey, "is a wonderful science, if one only knew something beyond its mere facts. I want to know *why* two gases form water, when mixed in given proportions—why chlorine destroys colours and odours—why laughing gas intoxicates you. What we call science is only classified ignorance."

"Then it is just as well to be ignorant without classification, as ladies generally are," said Claudia.

"What a beautiful colour the vapour of iodine is!" said Anne. "I don't think I ever beheld anything so exquisite."

"If I recollect," observed Claudia, "it is very much the colour of Stephen's eyes."

"Ironical flattery is cruel," said Stephen, who was rather surprised at Claudia's gaiety.

"How strange," said Anne, "that that stuff—what did he call it?—should catch fire when it touches water! It seems so absurd."

"Potassium, you mean," said Humphrey. "Well, that ex-

periment illustrates the weakness of what is called chemical science."

"How so?" asked the Panther.

"Why, look here. Two elements, oxygen and hydrogen, are in close partnership—closer than man and wife a great deal. The result we call water, and drink it—some of us. Now why should there be a third malignant element that takes delight in separating these two attached lovers? Potassium is the rascal; he—or perhaps I had better say she, for it is quite a ladylike business—has so strong a passion for oxygen, that she forcibly extracts her true love from the water, and so violently as to set both the hydrogen and herself on fire. Whence this mad passion? Chemists only say—'Oh, potassium has a great affinity for oxygen.' To me it almost seems like the jealous work of a living creature, just as if Rosaline, the scarlet-lipped beauty whom that rascal Romeo deserted for Juliet, had followed him in wild anger, and killed both Juliet and herself."

"That is the action of potassium, is it?" said Claudia. "The chemical type of a jealous woman. Curious! Anne, the lecturer did not tell you all this, did he?"

"No, it is some of Mr. Morfill's fantastic speculation. He is fond of odd notions. I think he would have been an alchemist or an astrologer if he had lived in old times."

"I believe in both sciences," said Stephen.

"I believe it is getting late," said Humphrey. "Come, the ladies are tired of us."

They rose to go. Claudia took an opportunity to approach Stephen, and whispered in his ear with singular distinctness—

"*I hate you, Stephen. You shall never marry Anne Page.*"

He gave her a sorrowful look, and then went away with his friend. But not home, as yet; it was a night of glorious moonlight, and they paced the cathedral close, solacing themselves with the enchanted weed.

CHAPTER IX.

IN A GONDOLA.

HE is somewhat daring who ventures to make Venice a scene of his romance. Has not Shakespeare the myriad-minded been there twice?—once with his wondrous comedy and peerless Portia, and that divine little Jewess Jessica—

> "In such a night
> Did pretty Jessica, like a little shrew,
> Slander her love, and he forgave it her"—

once with that tear-compelling tragedy of the doom of Desdemona, with

> "That whiter skin of hers than snow,
> And smooth as monumental alabaster?"

Nor Shakespeare only; but men of smaller mould than he, to whom yet we in this day seem pigmies. Voltaire's kings, and Schiller's masked Armenian; Byron, hymning in his strongest verse the "sea Cybele, fresh from ocean," fed with gems of "the exhaustless East," and in another mood telling the story of Beppo; Shelley, longing

> "Never to leave sweet Venice, for to me
> It was delight to ride by the lone sea;
> And then the town is silent—one may write
> Or read in gondolas, by day or night,
> Unseen, uninterrupted."

Later, Disraeli the younger, with that hero whose story, as his preface tells us, "has had the rare fortune of being cherished by great men;" and Ruskin, who puts artistic and architectural paradox in sonorous prose; and Arthur Clough, exclaiming—

> "Oh beautiful beneath the magic moon
> To walk the watery way of palaces;
> Oh beautiful, o'ervaulted with gemmed blue
> This spacious court; with colour and with gold,
> With cupolas and pinnacles and points,
> And crosses multiplex and tips and balls
> (Wherewith the bright stars unreproving mix,
> Nor scorn by hasty eyes to be confused);
> Fantastically perfect this lone pile
> Of Oriental glory; those long ranges
> Of classic chiselling; this gay flickering crowd,
> And the calm Campanile!"

Last, but how far from least, the greatest of living poets has been "In a Gondola," and has sung—

> "Oh which were best, to roam or rest?
> The land's lap or the water's breast?
> To sleep on yellow millet-sheaves
> Or swim in lucid shallows, just
> Eluding water-lily leaves,
> An inch from Death's black fingers, thrust
> To lock you, whom release he must;
> Which life were best on summer eves?"

Ah, can I venture on the charmed Venetian water after these? Can I write in my gondola after Shelley's divine lyrics, or look up eagerly for a flushed face at a balcony for an embrace of her whom Browning beheld stretching to regain her lost loory, till

> "Quick the round smooth cord of gold,
> The coiled hair on her head, unrolled,
> Fell down her, like a gorgeous snake
> The Roman girls were wont of old,
> When Rome there was, for coolness' sake,
> To let lie curling o'er their bosoms"?

Pshaw! Authors must not be cowards in these days; "faint heart never won fair lady;" and there is one fair lady whom I fain would win to read this story.

Raphael Branscombe was in the silent city; not because, like Contarini Fleming, he was drawn thither by some magic impulse, but simply because he rather liked it. And though, again unlike Contarini, the Seraph had no special predisposition for conspiracies, he had a wonderful genius for adventure. He was in the midst of one now; or perhaps 'twere better to say it had reached its acme, and Raphael was getting a little tired of it.

The Seraph was singularly unaltered since we saw him at Kingsleat so long ago. He was boyish and beautiful as ever. No trace of beard or whisker marred the feminine curves of cheek and chin. You might have thought that he drank the elixir of youth. He lay back in his chair at breakfast, according to his old custom; and Louis supplied him abundantly with comestibles; and he gazed languidly through an open window towards a palace on the opposite side of the narrow canal.

In that palace dwelt two English ladies, the Countess of Shottesbrooke and Lady Æmilia Hastings, her youngest daughter. The elder lady was an average countess dowager, unpleasantly hard up. As for Lady Æmilia, I am tempted again to quote a famous poet—

> "Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red,—
> On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bell-flower on its bed,
> O'er the breast's superb abundance where a man might base his head."

Yes; Æmilia was very much "such a lady." She reminded me often of Browning's Ottima, or of Byron's Dudù—

> "Being somewhat large and languishing and lazy,
> Yet of a beauty that would drive you crazy."

She had driven a good many people crazy in her time; and was at present occupied in doing the same kind act for a young Mr. Bouverie Hudson, a millionaire of five and twenty, whose father was generally believed to have been a tailor, and whose prænomen, according to some wicked wit, had been given him because he lodged in Bouverie Street. Hudson was a very agreeable affable innocent young fellow, who was maddened by Lady Æmilia's sleepy beauty. The Countess encouraged him; he would be a capital match for her daughter; but he could not

succeed in awakening the slightest amount of interest in those great drowsy eyes of hers.

Even now, as Raphael lounged over his late breakfast, Mr. Bouverie Hudson was in attendance on the lady of his love. He had arranged a morning stroll in a gondola, if I may use such a phrase, to see some church or palace or island of the lagoons—I forget what. And the hour had come, and the Countess had already dressed to start, and Lady Æmilia declined to move.

"I am so weary of it all," she said. "And it is so hot."

And she sank back in her chair the very picture of lassitude.

"It will be pleasantly cool on the water," said the Countess.

"O mamma! don't try to persuade me. You know what an indolent creature I am. *You* go with Mr. Hudson—you'll enjoy it, I daresay—and bring him back to dinner."

She sighed with the exertion of saying so much. Her invincible indolence made her quite an autocrat. So the Countess of Shottesbrooke and Mr. Bouverie Hudson started together, the young gentleman looking anything but happy.

Their gondola had scarcely left the steps when Lady Æmilia so far exerted herself as to rise from her seat, and fasten to the blind of the balcony a morsel of rosy ribbon. Then she actually went and dressed herself, and, returning to the saloon, sat watching by the window.

"Confound the girl!" murmured Raphael to himself, as he saw that silken signal. "Louis, the gondola."

He prepared to go out, though in leisurely fashion. Having lighted a cigar, he also fastened a strip of ribbon to the blind. When Æmilia saw it, she sprang up with a promptitude, and tripped down the marble stairs with an agility, which you would not have imagined in her.

Raphael's gondola shot rapidly across from one palace portal to the other. When the Lady Æmilia had entered it, away it floated through these labyrinthine canals—what matter whither?

A sunny atmosphere of delight seemed to surround Æmilia as she lay back on the cushions, alone with Raphael. They were silent for a long time. At last Raphael, having finished his cigar, half rose from his seat, and looked upon the lady's face, and kissed her drooping eyelids.

"So Hudson is teasing you still, my child?" he said.

"Yes, and mamma encourages him dreadfully. Oh, I am so tired of it all. I wish I had never seen you, Raphael."

"Why, you silly little thing," he exclaimed, "what next? You know that an hour with me on these quiet waters is worth a year of your slow lazy life? What have I taught you, come?"

"You have taught me to love you, Raphael. And I wish I had not learnt it. And I never know whether you love me or not."

"That is a question on which no young lady should permit herself to have a doubt."

"*Do* you love me, Raphael?" she asked eagerly.

"How many times have you asked me that, Æmilia? And how many times have I told you that I don't care very much for anybody but myself? When will you learn to know me, child?"

"I don't like you when you jest in this way," she said. "If you don't love me, why do you kiss me?—why do you"——

"Because I like it," he replied. "You are very nice—and you love me, I know, which is very pleasant—and I like to float in a gondola with my arm round your waist, and your charming head on my shoulder. And if I am satisfied, why should not you be, my pet?"

"But this can't go on for ever," she said, in speech far more rapid than his; for she was eager, and he was cool and calm. "You know it can't; what am I to do?"

"For ever," said Raphael meditatively. "No, *indeed*. Perhaps an eternity of it might get monotonous, but I am not yet very much fatigued. Oh, if I could only stay in one place without being bored, and you could always be beautiful and young, it would be very tolerable here in Venice."

And he kissed her lips this time. And then he lazily lit another cigar.

"But, Raphael," she said, after a long pause, "what *am* I to do? Tell me. You haven't told me?"

"Marry Hudson, I should think."

"Oh, now you are cruel!" she cried passionately. "You know I hate that man."

"Which need not prevent your marrying him. He worships you. Come, child, be reasonable; you know I can't marry; you know you must marry money. Here is this good-tempered young fellow as madly in love with you as you are with me. Make him happy—and be as contented as you can manage to be yourself."

"Raphael, you are a fiend!"

"Don't be abusive, my pet, or I won't give you another kiss this morning. Was it my fault, you little fool, that you fell passionately in love with me? Why, you were like a ripe peach—you dropt into my hand, you know you did. I have told you all this before; you need not make a man talk so much this hot weather. There! my cigar is out."

Æmilia was half smiles, half tears. So foolishly she loved this man that she could not be angry with him. She was his slave. She could have thrown herself on the ground at a word, for him to tread upon her. I believe she would have cast herself headlong into the canal, if Raphael had bidden her. And now, while he talked with this cool cynicism, she clung to him with servile love.

"If I could marry," resumed the Seraph, after a while, "I would marry you, Æmilia—and that is more than I ever said to any woman before. If either you or I had a clear thousand a year, I would marry you. I don't know that I should be happy; I think not; if I know myself at all, I should desert you in about six months. But *you* would be happy—for a week or two."

And he hummed—he had a capital tenor voice, Raphael—a stanza of Murger's song—

> "Yesterday seeing the swallows whirl,
> Summer's guests in a happier clime,
> I thought once more of the darling girl
> Who used to love me—when she had time—
> '—When she had time!'"

"Ah!" said Lady Æmilia, with a sigh, after another pause, "what would my brother say if he knew?"

"My dear girl," said Raphael, "you are in a fanciful state this morning. Be calm. I like repose. If you worry yourself your eyes will lose their brightness, and your cheeks their colour, and your bust its divine curve—and then you won't catch me in a gondola with you again in a hurry. Your brother the Earl is as gallant a boy as ever lived—and if he knew, why, I suppose he'd kill me, for it wouldn't be gentlemanly for me to kill him, you know—and I really shouldn't so much care if I felt sure there was a Venice in the next world, and a pretty Æmilia ready to love me. But the parsons, who ought to know, I suppose, don't give one any such ideas, I'm sorry to say."

The well-disciplined gondolier, who knew the value of time, had brought them back to where Lady Æmilia dwelt. Raphael gave her a farewell kiss.

"Good-bye, child," he said. "Go and tell mamma, like a dutiful daughter, that you think you'll marry Hudson, if he'll make a good settlement on you. I'll make you a wedding present. Run away."

She ascended the stairs. He, returning to his palace, found that the post had in the interval arrived, and that there was a letter in his father's well-known hand. Better say "fist," perhaps; Devil Branscombe wrote a most characteristic and unmistakable fist, and sealed his letters with a vast shapeless splash of wax, whereon a muzzled mastiff and the motto "*Cave!*" seemed equally characteristic.

"What's the row now?" said Raphael, breaking the seal. The letter was dated from Idlechester. "By Jove," said Raphael to himself, "the old gentleman has taken a queer fancy." Thus ran the epistle—

"Dear Raphael,—You remember old Langton the tanner—big old fellow with a strong smell of leather. Well, here I am

in his house in the High Street, comfortably shut up in a front bedroom, and watching all that goes on at poor Page's opposite. Amusing, rather. Nobody knows I'm here, though Walter knew I was coming; settled it all with him at the Dolphin at Southampton. Very fair wine at the Dolphin, for a country inn.

"You'll say, what the deuce is it all about? Well, Page left his money so that half of it will go to old Langton's grandson, if we don't look sharp. Your uncle, who's got his wits about him, suggested the best way out of it—Claudia to marry young Langton, and then you to come over and marry Page's little girl. She's very pretty, I hear; and, as you've had your fling, it can't matter much whom you marry. She's got close upon four thousand a year.

"So I want you to come and meet me and talk it over. I shall start for Guernsey as soon as I've talked to Claudia. I saw her go along the street just now. Wouldn't she have been astonished if she had known who was looking at her! R. B.

"*P.S.*—I mean to go to Baden or some such place, and see if I've any luck with the thousand Page left me. He might as well have made it ten. I shall wait for you in Guernsey—but be as quick as you can, for I'm tired of the infernal hole."

"That's your game, is it, old gentleman?" said Raphael. "Under the circumstances, perhaps I'd better not hurry myself. You can't spend much money in Guernsey, at any rate. However, I must go to talk to you, that's certain—and it will be a fine opportunity of dropping that little Hastings. She's getting tiresome, poor child. As to Anne Page, why, she must be a mere baby yet. So much the better perhaps, in some respects. Her money would make us all right."

The next morning Raphael signalled early to his fair neighbour opposite, and sat smoking in proximity to the window, awaiting a reply. None came all through the long bright day.

"Strange," he thought. "Æmilia is generally in a deuce of a hurry. I suppose the old woman has made her go out somewhere."

But when on the next day the same thing happened, Raphael said to his valet—

"Louis, I want you to find out quietly what Lady Shottesbrooke is doing."

"Her ladyship has left Venice, sir," said Louis promptly. "I have just heard it."

Louis was a model valet, always knew what his master wanted to know, but never entered on a subject except by his master's desire.

"Left, eh!" soliloquised Raphael. "I wonder if there has been a row. Louis," he said to his valet, "I shall leave too. I

shall go to Rome for a day or two, and then I think of crossing to Corsica. We'll start this evening."

There *had* been a row. We left Æmilia slowly ascending the palace stairs. When she reached the saloon, to her amazement she was received by her mother.

"Well, Lady Æmilia Hastings, pray where have you been? I thought you were too indolent to move."

"I suppose one may change one's mind, mamma."

"Oh, of course! At the same time I presume I may inquire where you have been, and in whose company?"

"Whom do I know here?" asked Lady Æmilia. "What do you mean by '*In whose company?*'"

"I mean," said the Countess, "that for a young lady of your rank to be alone in a gondola with a man whose character is so bad as Mr. Raphael Branscombe's is sufficient to ruin her reputation."

The girl was taken by surprise. Though the noiseless labyrinthine canals of Venice, with their mysterious gondolas, are the natural home of intrigue, yet the secrets of the Venetian waters are not always kept. Gossip exists there, especially among the resident English; and the Countess had that very morning encountered another dowager who knew more than herself of her daughter's movements. So she had hastily returned, finding some pretext for the alteration of her design, and dismissing Mr. Hudson till dinner-time.

"If Mr. Branscombe has so bad a character," said Lady Æmilia, "why do you let him come here?"

"It is impossible," said the Countess, "to exclude an Englishman of fashion, whom you meet everywhere. But if he were the most virtuous man in the world, it would not justify you in going out with him alone."

"Not if I were affianced to him?" she asked.

"Why, that would be worse than all," the Countess almost shrieked. "He has no money; he is a pauper, and is far too clever to marry a pauper. Æmilia," she said solemnly, "I don't know how far you have gone with him, and I have no wish to know, but we shall leave Venice at once, and you will accept Mr. Hudson."

"*Never*," said Æmilia.

"*You will*," replied her mother firmly. "Otherwise I will write at once to Edward, and tell him of your intrigue with this Mr. Branscombe."

The threat was effective. The young Earl, his sister knew well, had a high notion of the family honour. *Sans peur et sans reproche* himself, and descended from a stainless ancestry, he was certain to hear of her doings with indignation.

"Good heaven!" she thought, "and Raphael would be killed. He said he could not defend himself. It is dreadful."

Poor girl, she was awakened from her indolent languor now.

She loved this man, who was utterly unworthy of her, with the most absolute love. And if she sacrificed herself to a man for whom she cared nothing, it was to save Raphael from her brother's vengeance.

"Mamma," she said faintly, "I submit. Now leave me alone, please." She sank back in her chair, and wept as if her heart would break.

The Countess, heedless of her daughter's tears, went away smiling at her own success.

That day the happy Hudson, after a charming dinner, received from the Countess a hint that he might speak. And he spoke, frankly and fairly, like a fine foolish young fellow as he was; and Lady Æmilia intoxicated him with an indolent *Yes*. But ah, poor child! she shuddered at his delight, and shrank from the lips that touched her own. And, before they started for England, she wrote a note to Raphael, which came to him through a gondolier, after she was gone. It was a very little note:—

"DEAR CRUEL RAPHAEL,—I have obeyed you. I should not have had courage, but mamma found out that I love you, and I was afraid Edward would kill you. I don't know *what* she knows. Forget me, *please*. ÆMILIA."

"Poor little rogue!" thought Raphael, when he read it. "That's all over."

He went, as he intended, to Rome; having written to his father to say that he was on his way to Guernsey. Rome had not at that time become quite such a suburb of London as it now is. People had not begun to write—

> "Jemima was cross, and I lost my umbrella,
> That day at the tomb of Cæcilia Metella."

There was no croquet at the Aldobrandini. Story and Weld had not written their dreary books, nor had my friend Mr. Locker set up as Laureate of the eternal city. Raphael only stayed a day or two; there was, of course, nobody there; and he took wing to Naples, to look once more upon its voluptuous bay and the pale cone of Vesuvius. Raphael, a thorough Epicurean, intensely enjoyed fine scenery. All his tastes were exquisite. If he had possessed any kind of ethics, he would have been a very good sort of fellow.

CHAPTER X.

ON AN ISLAND.

I DO not know what drew Raphael Branscombe to Corsica. I am disposed to think it was destiny. When a man does a thing inexplicable not only to the world but to himself, he is perhaps drawn into one of those *currents* of life which seem often to interfere with its main tidal movement. If any one had asked Raphael why he was going to the mysterious island of revenge and of conquest, he certainly could not have told. The idea had only occurred to him when he heard that Æmilia had left Venice; but he made up his mind instantly, although he knew that his father was anxiously awaiting him in quite another island, eager to start for some place where he could get rid of that unlucky thousand pounds.

Raphael crossed in a sailing-boat from Livorno. The Tuscan channel is sprinkled with lovely islets—sporades of the Italian sea. Passing out of sight of Livorno's crowded harbour, lying at the foot of Monte Nero; passing Meloria, a solitary rock with a shattered tower, by which was fought the sea fight which destroyed the Genoese republic; passing Gorgona and Capraja, where one remembers Dante's execration against Pisa—

> "Movasi la Capraja e la Gorgona,
> E faccian siepe ad Arno in su la foce,
> Si ch' egli annieghi in te ogni persona,"—

and where one also naturally thinks of anchovies: passing Elba too, where men vainly thought to imprison a Titan; the voyager approaches Bastia. Raphael entered the harbour, with its dark amphitheatre of mountains, at eventide. The first words that he heard through the dim light upon the quay were *Ammazzato! ammazzato!* A Corsican had become rather excited in conversation with a friend, and had stabbed him with three strokes of a dagger; *ammazzatto con tre colpi di pugnale.* The *sbirri* were after him; he had fled to the *macchia.* He who once flies to the *macchia*, the wild mountains and forests of Corsica, is a bandit for life

Raphael was rather amused than alarmed by this ominous reception. After some trouble he got into a locanda, where, by the smoky light of an ill-trimmed oil-lamp, he supped on wheaten bread and cheese of ewe's milk and fiery Corsican wine. He got slight rest that night. In the early morning he strolled down to the beach, and dipped in the divine wave, and feasted his sight with the islets of Capraja and Elba and romance-empurpled Monte Cristo, afar amid the haze. Then, an experienced traveller,

he went to the fish-market to look for breakfast; and was recommended to try the murena, the best of all fish, which resembles a serpent of porphyry; and gazed with delight on the innumerable piscine forms of the Corsican waters. Thence to the fruit-market on the Piazza Favaleni, where the peaches, apricots, green almonds, pomegranates, Muscat grapes from Cape Corso, figs, magnificent melons, were crowded in profuse abundance. Beautiful young girls bring them in baskets on their heads, whose abundant tresses are hidden by the picturesque *mandile*, a head-dress older than the Tarquins.

Raphael thoroughly enjoyed all this. He had with him but one book, a favourite comrade of travel, a Tauchnitz *Odyssey;* he read it by the sea in Corsica, and thought himself in Ogygia. Do not fear, reader, that I am going to follow him step by step. Forgetting his eager father, he went to Fabiani, the bookseller, and bought of him Marmocchi's topographic work on Corsica. He climbed the green mountain Cardo, and looked down upon the Mediterranean, whose hue, as Dante said, is *color del oriental zaffiro*, and crushed out as he climbed the odour of those myriad flowers and herbs which caused Napoleon to say at St. Helena, "I should know Corsica with my eyes shut, by its fragrance." Then from Bastia he traversed Cape Corso, and entered the beautiful stalactite cavern of Brando, and rested in Luri's enchanted valley, tasting its wondrous wine, and crossed the Serra to Pino on the Ligurian Sea, and ascended to the Tower of Seneca, where the Stoic and poetaster expiated his ambitious love by eight years' exile, exclaiming—

"Hic sola hæc duo sunt, exsul et exsilium,"

and returning, sailed the coast to Vesovato, whence Murat, "a great knight and a small intellect," made his last attempt to recover his lost kingdom, and climbed through the chestnut groves and festooned clematis to lofty Oreto (*oros*), where he found no locanda, but frank hospitality. A peasant, in brown smock and Phrygian cap, gave him soup of vegetables, goat's flesh, and peaches, the pretty daughter waiting at table, and wondering at the stranger. After supper he went to the church, standing on the verge of a steep rock, whence there is an incomparable view over chestnut-covered mountains and an island-dotted sea; and there meeting the Curé, enjoyed a delicious glass of wine with him, and a pleasant talk about the two Paolis, Pasquale and Clement, the one statesman and leader, the other soldier and fanatic. Then he returned and chatted to the playful Giulia, a merry maiden of sixteen, who did not know her own age, but knew she looked very pretty in the *faldetta*, and so brought it out and arrayed herself with it for the wanderer's amusement. And the next day, with the peasant as guide, he rode through the chestnut forests of Orezza, where a family can

live if they possess six groats and as many chestnut-trees, to Morosaglia, the birthplace of Paoli.

Ferdinand Gregorovius, in his delightful book about this romantic island, says that it contains men of Homer, of Plutarch, and of Goethe. Raphael found some of each among the goat-herds of Monte Rotondo, where the wild waters of the milk-white Restonica foam endlessly, and the herdsmen store their cheeses in the very caverns of Polyphemus; on the dizzy steep of Bonifazio, whence you see the fanal on Sardinia's northern-most cape, while on the islets below lie half-hewn columns which were meant for mighty houses in the Rome of the Cæsars; above all, at Isola Rossa, whose blood-red island cliffs and gray Pisan towers and phosphorescent sea delighted him. He echoed the poetic traveller who exclaimed, "Verily, I swear I have reached the magic shore of the Lotos-eaters." As you enter the town there rises a fountain in an open space, where is a bust of Paoli, who built the place under a fire from Genoese gun-boats. Children were playing there; one of these, a beautiful boy about eight years old, showed him the way to a little coffee-house. Here a merry young landlady, Chilina Benvenuta, made him an abundant supper of fish and fruit, and gave him pleasant songs to the guitar as he sipped his wine on a marble bench outside, gazing at sunset on the sea.

"By the ghost of Odysseus," he said to himself, "here will I stay awhile, though I eat nothing save murenas and mulberries, and though the head of the house of Branscombe never reach Baden."

He stayed. He sailed on those charmed waters in a boat called the *Fantasia*—a poetic name; he loitered on the three red cliffs, and on the snow-white sands streaked with sanguine coral dust, and along by the little nunnery in a garden by the sea, where dwell the Sisters of the Madonna alle Grazie. And he made the acquaintance of a fine old Corsican, kingly as Alcinous, who dwelt among his olive grounds and vineyards and mulberry gardens in Homeric simplicity, with only a grand-daughter as companion. Angelo Montalti made the Englishman wondrously welcome, and gave him *broccio* cake, and trout from the hill-streams, and goat's flesh dressed by his own hands, and fruit from his multitudinous trees, and the fragrant but too fiery wine of his own vineyards, while sweet young Fiordilisa Montalti stood and served the guest in primæval fashion.

Fiordilisa, the lily of Isola Rossa, was slender and shapely, and full of maidenhood's pure simplicity. She looked upon Raphael as Nausicaa on that famous wanderer of the elder world. She would have delighted an Italian painter with her hair of Apollo's auburn, and her eyes of Athene's colour, and her fluent flexile form. A child; no more; but how beautiful a child! Those bare round warm white arms; those hands, snowy as the delicate *broccio*; that liquid Italian voice, which at eventide rang sweetly

in the wild plaintive *voceri;* that dainty rosebud of a mouth, honey-sweet for the kisses that are to come—Raphael found them only too attractive. And Raphael always coveted the beauty which he saw.

It was an out-door life at Isola Rossa. On the seashore or in the sea itself the children of the village played in happy crowds. At night, sometimes outside the little locanda, sometimes in a great green orchard of Angelo Montalti's, full of grey olives and old gnarled mulberry trees—there was idyllic song, sometimes playful, sometimes touched with divine melancholy. The young girls and boys would improvise couplets, as in *Fra Lippo Lippi*—

"Flower o' the broom,
Take away love, and our earth is a tomb."

"Flower o' the quince,
I let Lisa go, and what good's in life since?"

"Flower o' the rose,
If I have been merry, what matter who knows?"

"Flower o' the clove,
All the Latin I construe is *amo*, I love."

"Flower o' the thorn,
Joy of the midnight is sorrow at morn!"

Or sometimes—

"Amo un presidente,
Sta in letto senza dente!"

"Amo un cameriere,
Sta in letto senza bere!"

Oh, what a ripple of laughter from gay young lips at each successive distich! Raphael, sensitive to all sweet influences, thought he had never known any enjoyment so near perfection. He forgot Venice, and poor beautiful Æmilia, soon to be tied to her millionaire; he forgot sweet Anne Page, whom he was expected to marry; I regret to say he forgot Devil Branscombe, who used to stalk up and down the cacodorous old pier at Guernsey, and into Redstone's shop, and through the market towards Cadic's for his cigars, swearing in muttered thunder at his recusant son and heir.

"You should buy land, signor, and settle among us," said the coquettish Chilina one morning, as Raphael sat over his breakfast under a great mulberry tree which shaded the *casa*. Then she sang—

"I love a stranger who
Lingers here with nothing to do."

Raphael smiled at the notion of his buying land, but answered—

"If I were obliged to remain here I should want to be away. I enjoy being here, because I ought to be somewhere else."

Chilina laughed merrily, showing the whitest teeth in the world.

"You are as bad as my husband," she said; "he is always wanting to go to Paris. What is Paris like? Is it much larger than Corsica? Is England in Paris?"

Raphael had often to reply to questions such as these. After giving such explanation as he could, he lit a cigar and started for Montalti's, lazily loitering along the sands, and gazing where birds innumerable haunted the blood-red cliffs.

Angelo Montalti was about seventy—a fine athletic old patriarch, full of spirit. The history of Corsica, the noble career of Paoli, the marvellous triumphs of Napoleon, were his favourite subjects of converse with the stranger. Raphael found him amid his olive and orange trees, with Fiordilisa, fresh as the dewy dawn, by his side. And he also this morning said—

"Why not remain among us, Signor Raffaelle? Camillo Saliceti is dead; his house is to be sold—the white house with the green blinds under the great chestnut trees where the little river Ostriconi enters the sea."

"Ah! that would be charming," said the Lily with delight. "You will stay, will you not?"

"I will stay," he answered, "till I am obliged to go. It must be soon, I fear. And I am happier than I ever was, or shall be again."

"And you fly from happiness?" said Angelo. "Thus all men do, so I cannot wonder at you. But stay while you will, and when you abandon us we shall regret you."

I wish I had the magic pencil of Millais to paint that old gray house with its orchards by the sea, and the aged Angelo, and the beautiful child, and Raphael standing under the golden-fruited and purple-berried leafage. I can see it all; I can hear Fiordilisa's low sweet voice, more musical than the coo of a dove; but, reader, I want you also to see and hear.

"I want to sail this morning in the *Fantasia*," said Raphael. "Will you come, Fiordilisa? Will you come, Angelo?"

"Go you, Fiordilisa," said Montalti. "I have many things to do."

So away tripped the beautiful girl for her faldetta, and she and Raphael went over the white coral-veined sands to where the lateen-sailed boat had been pushed out by a couple of fishermen; and soon they were outside the ruddy islands, whence the long peninsula of Cape Corso, and the little town, and the three magnificent mountains behind it, Santa Angiola, Santa Susanna, and rugged Feliceto, with villages clinging to their steep sides, made up a glorious landscape. Raphael steered: Fiordilisa trailed her fingers in the sparkling sea, and murmured a low song.

"Sing, Lisa," he said, "so that I may hear you."

"After you, Signor Raffaelle," she said. "You first."
So he sang, in that luscious tenor of his—

"Come to the garden, Minna, my sweet!
Foamless and calm is the violet sea:
Oh, thy dainty lips and thy finger tips
Shall be stained with the fruit of the mulberry tree.

"Heat of the noontide, Minna, my sweet!
Chains back the winds from their wandering glee,
But the air is cool as a forest pool
Under dense green boughs of the mulberry tree.

"Loop back thy tresses, Minna, my sweet!
Those rich brown ringlets fluttering free;
And the summer shall flush thee with brighter blush
Than the ruddiest fruit of the mulberry tree.

"Summer and Love, O Minna, my sweet!
Are angels twain who dwell with thee:
Lo! now they pursue us, and merrily woo us
Forth to the shade of the mulberry tree."

The song died across the windless wave. The Lily of Isola Rossa looked at the singer with madid eyes and lips half parted. Raphael, only too skilled in such devil's diagnosis, saw in those moist orbs and tremulous lips the first symptoms of love.

"Now, Fiordilisa, I am going to tack. Then sing." And she sang—

"Why do I love the sea's sweet lustre
When with him o'er the waves I go?
Is it because the foam bells cluster?
Is it because the free winds blow?
Is it for sunset's beauty? *No!*

"Why do I love the garden alleys,
Golden above and green below?
Why do I love the shadowy valleys
Cooled by the icy brooklet's flow?
Is it for shade and sweetness? *No!*

"Ah! should I love the ocean-furrows
Purple and green in sunset's glow—
Ah! should I love the wind's susurrus
Where on the hills gray olives grow—
If I were there without him? *No!*"

Very poorly have I translated the easy simplicity of the fluent Italian. These Corsican maidens have the art of the Improvisatrice; their song is spontaneous. How gaily the arch and piquant "*No*" came with exquisite iteration and reiteration from Fiordilisa's charming lips.

Raphael could resist no longer. He drew the beautiful creature to himself, and kissed her with passionate kisses.

"Will you be my wife, Lisa?" he said.

Fiordilisa sank upon his breast. She was won, this Nausicaa of Corsica. She gave herself to him with utter love, with a child's faith, in the simplicity and purity of her nature. And, as he steered the *Fantasia* shorewards, with the Lily of Isola Rossa lying in his arms, and gazing into his dreamy inscrutable eyes, Raphael thought there might be a worse fate than to dwell upon

"Some unsuspected isle in far-off seas,"

with a creature so divine as Fiordilisa. Love had breathed a soul into her, as into Undine; she was no longer the childish little Corsican village girl, but a maiden of romance, fit bride for the knightliest wooer; and Raphael knew that, amid all his many amours, he loved never so truly, never so worthily.

He ran the *Fantasia* ashore. He lifted the little beauty over the shallow water to the sands. They walked together, slowly and lovingly, to old Montalti's. It was a delicious afternoon in that land—

"In which it seemed always afternoon."

They entered the gray gateway, and the patriarchal Corsican advanced towards them under the fantastic trees. As he approached, the Lily ran forward and threw her arms around him, and kissed him. Then she ran away; for it was nearly dinner time, and dinner was her care.

"Signor Montalti, I love your granddaughter," said Raphael.

Old Angelo looked surprised.

"She is a child," he said.

"How old is she?" asked Raphael.

"She is sixteen. Well, perhaps it is not too young. Her mother married at sixteen. But will you stay among us, Signor Raffaelle?"

"I will stay among you," said Raphael.

"Then I say nothing against it," said Angelo. "She loves you?"

"She does."

"It is well. You are wiser than we and wealthier, and when I die, you may desire to leave Corsica. But do not sell the old house of the Montaltis."

"Do not fear," answered Raphael. "I belong myself to too old a race not to respect old memories."

Raphael Branscombe, a complete Epicurean, with whom indolence was a passion and energetic action only an occasional impulse, abandoned himself wholly to the delight of love. How pleasantly they dined that day, the two men at table, as usual, and Fiordilisa waiting upon them—an island princess of the primæval time ministering to Nestor and Odysseus! How her

fair face flushed as she looked upon her hero—the wanderer she had won!

"Now," said Angelo, putting aside the green wine-flask, whose sole stopper was a vine-leaf, "now will I show you there is wine in Corsica."

The old man descended into a cool crypt, and brought thence a stone jar, holding about three quarts—dark red its hue, its form Etruscan. He poured the wine into the great globular goblets, an oily amber liquid with a strange sparkle in its depths.

"It is of the year in which my son Angelo was born—Fiordilisa's father. He would be thirty-five if he lived now."

The Seraph had tasted wine in his time—in as many places and of as many qualities as most men. But never had there passed his lips anything to equal this old wine of Corsica, which, fiery in its youth, had mellowed into nectarous perfection. They drank to the happiness of the bridal that was to come.

It was fixed early—a month from that day. And, when the day came, a *Trovata* or triumphal arch of greenery and flowers arose opposite the Casa Montalti. And Fiordilisa, mounted on a snow-white pony, gaily caparisoned, passed under this archway amid a joyous procession to the little town. And girls from the balconies of Isola Rossa strewed flowers and grains of wheat as the bride passed; and guns were fired, and the mandoline and cornamusa played as they went to the church. And, after the venerable priest had performed the ceremony, there was a gay festival at Montalti's house; and a baby, in swaddling clothes, with numberless ribbons and flowers, was placed in Fiordilisa's hands, and they sang—

> "Dio vi dia buona fortuna,
> Tre di maschi e femmin' una!"

Raphael, in whom the dramatic faculty was strong, entered into all this with consummate felicity. When the revel was over, and the sweet night of autumn fell with its veiling mist upon Isola Rossa, Angelo Montalti said to his son-in-law—"Raffaelle, you should have been born a Corsican."

But Fiordilisa—white, slender, fragrant, as the snowy hyacinth—is gone to her chamber, and the silence of sleep falls on Isola Rossa.

Previous to his bridal, Raphael had sent his faithful attendant Louis to England for money, telling him also to go to Guernsey and make the best excuses he could to Ralph Branscombe for his son's delay. Louis was despatched before anything was known in the village of his master's marrying design, and was directed to wait for orders in Paris. For the astute Raphael, without contemplating bigamy or anything of the kind, thought it advisable, at least for the present, to keep his marriage unknown. He did not send any such notice to the *Times* as this:—

"On the 19th of September, at Isola Rossa, Corsica, by the Abbate Malaspina, Raphael, only son of Ralph Branscombe, of Branscombe, to Fiordilisa, granddaughter of Angelo Montalti."

But he actually wrote out such a notice, to see how it looked, and laughed heartily as he thought of the sensation it would cause in society. What would his father say, and his uncle, and Claudia, and Lady Æmilia, and a thousand others who knew him? And who did not know the Seraph—who, at least, that was anybody? Satan's rude remark to Ithuriel and Zephon was strictly applicable here.

So away went Louis on his master's affairs to England. And, having done his London business, he found his way to Guernsey, and told Devil Branscombe a long story of his own invention about his master's being taken ill in Sardinia, and being so anxious about the delay that he insisted on his valet's leaving him to explain it to his father. Which the old gentleman believing, only swore a little at Raphael's stupidity in going to such out-of-the-way places, and told Louis to make haste back to his master, and intrusted him with the following characteristic note:—

"Dear Raphael,—What the devil do you fall ill for just now? Look alive and get better, and make haste home and marry that little girl. I shall still wait here for you; it's pleasant in the cold weather; and I'll be hanged if you *can* spend anything, for claret and brandy and cigars cost nothing, and there isn't a pretty woman in the place. So I've put a couple of hundreds into this letter, for I'm better off just now than I have been since we cleared out young Ranthorp, who was so spoony on Claudia.

"Louis says I may expect you in a fortnight; so, mind, I expect you. R. B."

Louis had thought it best to make such an assertion, in order to keep the old gentleman quiet. Moreover, he knew nothing of his master's intentions, and judged, from being ordered to await him in Paris, that he meant soon to leave Corsica. So the valet, having faithfully fulfilled all his orders, and sent Raphael his letters and remittances, took holiday in Paris, waiting patiently.

And Raphael and Fiordilisa spent their honeymoon at Isola Rossa. The Seraph felt no *ennui*. He found his child-bride in all things perfect, exquisite. She worshipped him; he had been worshipped before, and by highborn English maidens; but the royal dignity and primæval simplicity of this daughter of romance delighted him far more. Born far beyond the weary world of fashion and flirtation, the Lily of Isola Rossa was a creature of poetry, poetic even when she milked the goats, and made the white balls of cheese-curd, and came with bare round arms to serve her grandfather and husband at the table. Ay, a simple mythical Ionian poetry surrounded her, as she came sometimes through the breezy shadows of the orange-orchard with a basket

of Hesperian fruit, or a red jar of clear water from the fountain upon her sunny head. Raphael would meet her at the portal, and kiss her white brow, and say—

"Now, Lisa, you have done enough work. Let us sail on the bay in the *Fantasia.*"

Raphael was popular in the little Corsican town. His remarkable personal beauty, the beauty of the son of Cinyras, was strange and attractive to the artistic perceptions of the townsfolk. He was liberal; for though poor in London, Raphael found himself opulent in Isola Rossa, and liberality was a characteristic of the Branscombes. He made friends of everybody, and went out fishing with the fishermen, and astonished them by the skill with which his rifle brought down the cliff pigeons, by the daring with which he swam far out to sea. He brought Fiordilisa down on moonlit evenings to join in the merry music outside Chilina's coffeehouse. And when the old shoemaker of Calvi came over with his sixteen-stringed *cetera*, the same which Gregorovius heard in his wanderings, and improvised a wondrous *serenata* which told how—

> "A stranger to Isola Rossa
> Has come in a fortunate hour,
> And he sees the sweet maid of Montalti
> In the shade of the mulberry bower,
> And he woos the fair darling whose tresses
> All golden fall down in a shower
> On her shoulders of rosy white marble—
> Our Fiordilisa, the flower"—

then Raphael gladdened the old man's heart with a gift such as a chieftain of the *Odyssey* might have bestowed on Demodocus.

So Raphael was popular in Isola Rossa—and old Angelo Montalti was happy—and sweet Fiordilisa was happy with that transcendent happiness which no pen can describe, but which the girl's heart feels when Eros has entered the warm white nest of her bosom, which heaves to the flutter of his wings. She drank perilous draughts of the vintage of love. There was no prophetic troubadour to sing to her—

> "Ay, quench thy deep thirst, ere the moment has flown
> But once in the lifetime of mortals 'tis known—
> But once—and old Care, an inflexible churl,
> Will darken the days of the prettiest girl."

And so the charmed hours flew by joyously, and all was tranquil on that delicious coast. It was an idyl: alas! I am not Theocritus.

Raphael's letters reached him safely; with them the thoughtful Louis had sent files of papers from London and Paris, and an ample supply of the novels of both cities. Some choice comestibles and liqueurs were also forwarded; for the Epicurean, much

as he enjoyed the fish and fruit of Corsica, missed his old luxuries. And a few chaste gems for Fiordilisa, which an æsthetic crony of Raphael's had been requested to choose for him. All these came to Ajaccio by the steamer from Marseille; and Raphael sailed in the *Fantasia* round the coast to fetch them. Wilful Fiordilisa longed to go, but he would not let her; and as they shoved off from the white sands the pretty creature wept at this first parting. The sagacious man of the world knew that to accustom her to partings would be wise.

'Tis myth, doubtless, that Ajaccio was founded by Ajax; but a greater hero than the son of Telamon was born there. Raphael, having received his letters and packages, and written to Louis a letter of three words—"Wait at Paris"—and visited the Casa Buonaparte, and passed one delightful evening on the Place du Diamant, looking on the glorious bay, again started for Isola Rossa. His sole companion was the husband of Chilina, the merry young landlady of the coffee-house. Marc Antonio, though a fisherman, had never voyaged as far as Ajaccio before, and thought that Paris could not be grander. The Corsicans are a stay-at-home people, except when they turn banditti. And Fiordilisa and Chilina were waiting on the sands where the saucy *Fantasia*, as good a sea-boat as my old friend Harry Waring's *Secret*, came flashing round the red tongue of land on the left. As she ran in upon the sands, the eager girl sprang into the shallow water towards Raphael.

"My God!" he said to himself, "how the child loves me!"

They went home to dinner, Marc Antonio bringing up the packages, which Raphael had not opened. And when the pleasant, simple meal was over, he said—

"Now, Lisa, you shall see what they have sent me."

She knelt upon the floor, opening package after package, while old Angelo and Raphael sipped their wine, and Marc Antonio, who had just brought up the last, stood with wondering eyes.

"Books!" she exclaimed. "Oh, what a number! Why, you cannot read all these, my Raphael. What are these square boxes? Oh! what hundreds of cigars! And this case—help me to open it, Marc Antonio. Bottles, I declare. Why, have we no wine in Isola Rossa?" she asked reproachfully.

"That is not wine," he said, and took out a bottle of Curaçao. "Now, Angelo, let us try this."

The old gentleman and Marc Antonio, drinkers by habit of a fiery wine, took to the liqueur naturally.

"It is good," said they both, with simultaneous sententiousness.

"Here is what will suit you better," said Raphael to Fiordilisa, sprinkling her with the Frangipanni of Piesse.

"Oh, how sweet!"

And then she found a superb Cashmere shawl, which she threw gracefully over her shoulders; and then Raphael opened the

casket of jewellery, and fastened round her beautiful throat a necklace of Oriental pearls, almost as white as her skin.

"You will make her vain, Raffaelle," said old Montalti gravely.

"He has done that already," she said; "he has loved me."

A brooch of emerald, the very colour of the Mediterranean; a brilliant set in dead gold, to sparkle on her white finger; a tiny watch, with heavy gold chain, that seemed too massive for her delicate neck: these were some of the beautiful gifts which Raphael lavished upon her in loving profusion. Marc Antonio went home and told his light-hearted little wife of these unprecedented splendours; and Isola Rossa that evening and all the next day had a most delightful theme for gossip and for marvel.

"The Englishman is a great prince," said Marc Antonio with an air of profound belief.

"He is a hero, and our friend," said Chilina.

Pleasantly passed the flying hours for Raphael and his beautiful bride. But at last there arrived from Paris more despatches of various kinds; and, when he had read them, he said to Fiordilisa—

"My flower, I must leave you for awhile."

"Oh why, Raffaelle?"

"My father is ill at Paris, and wants much to see me. I cannot disobey his desire; you would not wish me to?"

"No, Raffaelle," she said, though her beautiful bright eyes were dimmed with tears. "You must go. Go soon, and soon return."

"My darling, yes. And you must be very happy for my sake."

"I will try," she replied. "I shall think of nothing but your return. Oh, how I shall watch for the *Fantasia* when Marc Antonio is gone to meet you at Ajaccio!"

So Raphael departed for Ajaccio, and caught the Marseille steamer, and made no pause upon his journey until he reached the Hotel Bristol at Paris. There he arrived late in the evening, and ordered supper, and sent a messenger with a note to Louis's quarters. That prince of valets made his appearance on the instant.

"I am going to England, Louis," he said. "Be ready to start to-morrow morning. I hope you have enjoyed your long holiday."

"Passably, monsieur," was the reply. "I prefer being in attendance on monsieur."

"We shall have to cross to Guernsey, Louis," said Raphael. "My father is still there."

"Would not monsieur prefer to go to St. Malo, and cross by the Jersey steamboat?"

"An excellent idea," said Raphael.

Before he went to bed he wrote a long and loving letter to Fiordilisa.

When it was finished and sealed, he said—

"Poor little rogue! I wonder if I shall ever see her again."

CHAPTER XI.

ANOTHER WOOER

SHORTLY after the chemical lecture, the Rev. Walter Branscombe, having to return to Kingsleat, took his ward with him. Claudia of course accompanied him, and they settled down at the Rectory. This step was in contravention of Mr. Page's will; but the Rector and Mr. Drax were both of opinion that though Miss Page was directed to reside in the house at Idlechester, it was quite allowable for her occasionally to visit her relations. The suggestion was Claudia's; she recommended Anne's being as much as possible separated from Stephen Langton.

"I thought," said her uncle, indirectly referring to the plot which he had suggested to his brother, "that you might like to see him yourself now and then, Claudia."

"I despise the boy," she said, viciously emphatic: whence the Rector, whose acumen was considerable, at once guessed that she had tried and failed.

Ah, that poor Panther! how she vexed herself, tortured herself, over the affair! To have offered herself—she, whom so many had vainly wooed—to a mere boy, and to be refused! She wept tears of rage in the solitude of her chamber. She vowed to be revenged on Stephen Langton. Whatever happened, he should not marry Anne Page, she was thoroughly determined. But she felt powerless to do him injury, and all her indignation recoiled upon herself, intensifying her punishment.

The Rectory was a very quiet household. The Rector did his duty in his old regular fashion; Winifred was as parochial as ever, and rather more ceremonial; Anne Page continued her studies with her governess; and Claudia conjugated *s'ennuyer*. She was prodigiously bored at Kingsleat. So long as she had a plot to carry out, her life had some interest in it; but the plot had failed, and she was utterly without occupation. She could not drive tandem to Idlechester, as in the old days when she was left mistress of her father's establishment. She could only go out for decorous airings in the Rector's dignified equipage. She heard not a line from her father; she did not know when to

expect Raphael to come and wed the little heiress. And, indeed, she was a trifle afraid of the Seraph's arrival. He was almost preternaturally acute. She was in mortal dread of his discovering what had occurred between her and Stephen. Altogether, Claudia was anything but happy.

At length, however, something occurred to render the Panther a little less miserable. It was a fine December day, and the first flakes of a snow-storm were descending. Claudia and Winifred sat together in the drawing-room, which looked out upon the steep deserted street of Kingsleat. The Panther was listlessly reading *La Pucelle de Belleville;* and the Saint was writing an interminable letter. At last the former spoke—

"Really, Winifred, the scratching of your pen is very irritating. Who in the world will read a letter of such prodigious length?"

"Oh, it will be read!" answered Winifred.

"Now do tell me to whom you are writing at such unconscionable length. I won't say a word to Uncle Walter."

"My father is quite welcome to know all about it," she replied indignantly. "As you are so inquisitive, I am writing to Father Remigius. He is my confessor, and when I am at Kingsleat I confess to him by letter."

The Panther burst into a silvery peal of laughter. It was quite a relief in the monotony of Kingsleat to have anything so ridiculous to laugh at.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed, "what a number of sins you must have committed to fill all those sheets! I had no idea you were such a dreadfully wicked girl. Do let me read it, Winny, I am sure it will be more amusing than Paul de Kock, though he is great fun about *caleçons.*"

"I am ashamed of you, Claudia," said the Saint. "I would not let you see it for the world."

"Well, *is* there anything about *caleçons* in it?"

At this interesting point of the colloquy the door opened, and a servant announced Sir Arthur Willesden.

"Dear me, Sir Arthur," exclaimed the Panther, rising from her chair to meet him, "how glad I am to see you! You are welcome in this desert. This is my cousin Winifred."

Sir Arthur was a fine young fellow, an awful swell, whose brains and morals had all run to whiskers and moustache. He was just Mr. Tennyson's "oiled and curled Assyrian bull." He had been very wild in his time, and had kept racehorses, and other beautiful animals, and had played écarté with Devil Branscombe in that villa by the Thames where the Panther presided at the little suppers, and now he was in the hands of the Hebrews. He had come to Kingsleat entirely to see Claudia, on whom, to use his own elegant English, "he was—aw—spoons, rather," and had been vainly racking his brain all through the journey to invent some ostensible reason for coming. But she

was so pleased to see an old acquaintance of the nobler sex that she asked him no questions.

"It's—aw—a dull place this, rather, I fancy," he said.

"Dismally dull," said Claudia, "suicidally dull. Winifred and I were just drawing lots who should drink laudanum first, when you interrupted us; weren't we, Winny?"

The Saint looked aghast.

"It would be shocking—aw—for two such—aw—divine creatures to commit suicide."

"Thank you, Sir Arthur," said the Panther. "Thank you for Winny too; nobody ever tells her she's divine except her father-confessor. Now you're here, you must stay to luncheon, Sir Arthur."

"Very happy—aw," said he. "No particular fun—aw—walking about in this infernal snow. Horrid bad wine at the—aw—Mitre, where I'm stopping."

"You shall have a good glass of wine here," said the Panther, "and then you shall tell me all the news of the town. Papa and Raphael are both on the Continent, and I hear nothing from anybody."

"Is—aw—the Seraph all right?" he asked.

"Oh! he's quite seraphic, I expect," she answered. "But, positively, I don't know: I haven't heard from him for an age. I am in some hopes of his coming down here."

"Do you—aw—know his address? I owe him a monkey on the Leger."

"No," she said. "I daresay he'll be very glad of it, for he's always hard up."

"Aw—so am I—so's everybody, I think."

Winifred was rather perplexed by this offhand confabulation. She didn't know anything about the Leger, and hadn't the least idea what a monkey meant, and had no notion of any cherubim and seraphim except those in the *Te Deum*. I fear the fast young ladies of the day will think her ignorance exaggerated; but I can assure them it is true to the letter.

So Arthur Willesden stayed to luncheon, and to dinner, and astonished the Rector by flooring a couple of bottles of his finest port, and being none the worse for it.

"Don't—aw—hunt at Melton for nothing," he remarked. "That's the place to learn to drink port."

The young baronet, though he rode sixteen stone, was a first-flight man in the shires, and never funked anything. He was a cool head, like Raphael, but his was the coolness of unconquerable stolidity. The Panther, to keep Anne Page in the background till the Seraph's arrival, had ordained that that young lady should dine at midday, and only appear at dessert: she had also put her back into short frocks and frilled trousers, very much to her indignation. These alterations had been made on the removal to Kingsleat. Sweet Anne Page was very indignant

about it; she thought herself quite a woman, being nearly seventeen, and engaged to be married; but Claudia was resolute, and her will, as we know, was pretty strong. So Anne, who was very fresh and *petite*, really looked about twelve in her infantile costume. When she entered the dining-room, shy and bashful, on the present occasion, Sir Arthur exclaimed—

"Aw—what a pretty little girl! Come here, my dear—aw—and give me a kiss." He was sitting near the door, and had actually pulled her on his knee and kissed her before she was aware of his intention. The poor child burst into tears.

"Don't be silly, Anne," said Claudia. "If you cry, you shall be sent to bed."

The Panther could not get at Stephen, but she could persecute his poor little sweetheart for his sake, and she did so mercilessly. If Stephen could have known it, she would have been delighted.

Sir Arthur Willesden stayed at the Mitre for a long time, much to the landlord's satisfaction. He carried on a continuous flirtation with Claudia. He was always lunching or dining at the Rectory; but, as the Rector kept ecclesiastic hours, he used to sup at the Mitre about midnight, and play billiards with whomsoever he encountered. He seldom lost. Raphael, the best amateur in England, had made him pay for his skill in the game; and now the baronet made sad havoc with the fast young fellows of Kingsleat. But then they were delighted to lose money to a baronet—and so distinguished a baronet as Sir Arthur Willesden. Why, his name was in *Bell's Life* every week! Hadn't he won the Two Thousand with Isosceles, and run second for the Derby? And he actually condescended to win their provincial unaristocratic half-crowns at pool!

Meanwhile, Stephen was melancholy enough in his Idlechester lodgings. The Rector had courteously informed him that he considered Anne Page too young to be regarded as actually engaged to him; that, in fact, her education had been greatly neglected, and it was requisite that she should pass her time in the schoolroom; and that correspondence was not to be thought of. Stephen was of course obliged to acquiesce, and to have faith in his fairy princess. Such faith he had: and it consoled him pretty well; and he pursued his studies after his desultory fashion. It was desperately dull work.

He wanted a *confidante*. Humphrey Morfill was away; and besides, he had always shrunk from talking of his engagement to Humphrey. Stephen had a chivalrous idea of women. Spenser, or Sir Philip Sidney, or the Earl of Surrey could not have put them on a loftier, purer pedestal. But Humphrey professed to be a man of the world; he had lax and cynical notions about women; he thought Anne Page a nice little girl enough, but much too young for any practical purposes. So, had Humphrey been in the cathedral city, Stephen would not have confided in

him. And having no friend in his own family, Stephen was at length driven to tell his difficulties to Jack Winslow, and found in the vivacious barmaid a warm sympathiser. Even she, however, thought Anne very young to be anybody's sweetheart; but she was highly indignant at the Rector's interfering with an arrangement which Mr. Page had sanctioned.

One frosty forenoon Stephen, utterly weary of writing and reading, with which his uncontrollable thoughts perpetually interfered, strolled down to the Half Moon and solaced himself with a tankard of bitter ale and a cigar. He often met his grandfather there, who would hail him with "Well, Steve;" but deemed him too much a boy for a sustained conversation. But this morning business was slack, and the bar-parlour empty, and the fair barmaid had leisure to gossip.

"I should write to the young lady," she said, "if I were you."

"Mr. Branscombe prohibits it," he replied.

"What right has he or anybody to come between you and Miss Page, when her poor dead father wished her to marry you? I *would* write, I tell you."

"But then," urged Stephen, "they probably examine the letters, and I should get her into trouble."

"Ah, that would be a pity. But I'll tell you what; I'm going over to Kingsleat to see my aunt one day next week. You write a letter, and I'll see if I can't get her to have it so that no one shall know."

This project delighted Stephen, who had the letter ready in good time. Wednesday was market day at Kingsleat, and was the day Miss Winslow chose for her visit. To her honour be it said, that she allowed Stephen's affairs to take precedence of her own. Before visiting her aunt she took a walk through the crowded High Street, and was rewarded by seeing Anne and her governess returning homewards after a morning stroll. At this moment occurred to Jack what before she had not thought of—that, though she knew Anne by sight, Anne probably did not know her. This was perplexing. However, she decided to watch for an opportunity.

Kingsleat Street is very steep. Very slowly did Anne and the governess walk up it, Jack Winslow following. By and by Miss Marsden looked into a bookseller's shop at some new print there exhibited; and Jack, with great promptitude, gave Anne a gentle touch, and showed her the letter. Instinct told her it came from Stephen; she took it, and her hand returned with it to her muff; and the kind-hearted messenger was gone before the governess turned from the window.

But alack, Kingsleat Street is narrow as well as steep. By ill fortune, Claudia was descending on the other side, and her keen glance took in the whole transaction. She crossed the street and addressed Miss Marsden.

"If you are not tired," she said, "will you go to old Mason's

in East Street, and tell him Winifred can't come to see him to-day? I'll take charge of Anne."

The governess obeyed. Claudia had promised the Saint to call for her on this old bed-ridden client of hers, whom she supplied with broth and sermons. The other two walked slowly to the Rectory.

"Come up to my room, dear," said the Panther, in the hall; "I want to speak to you."

Anne followed her cousin, devoid of suspicion, though anxious in the possession of a letter which she eagerly desired to read.

"Sit down, child," said Claudia, "and take off your hat; I have something to say to you."

Anne did as she was bid, putting on a table that stood in the centre of the room her muff with the precious letter in it. Claudia also disrobed; and, having done so, took up the muff, which she held carelessly in her hand. Out fell the letter. Claudia picked it up.

"Why, Anne, my dear," she said to her cousin, who was in a state of consternation, "where did you get this? Who is it from?"

Anne was too thoroughly consternated to reply. Claudia broke the seal.

"O Claudia! please don't read it!" cried Anne Page eagerly; "it is only for *me* to read."

"Indeed," said the Panther coolly. "You evidently know all about it. I see it is from Stephen Langton, with whom you have been forbidden to correspond."

Claudia read it. It was a good letter, loving yet trustful, eager yet patient, boyish yet manly. The Panther did not love Stephen, but what would she not have given for such a letter from him? Oh! the bitter pain of reading it! Oh! the thirst for revenge it caused in her jealous heart! Having read it, she folded it up and put it aside.

"O Claudia, dear!" cried Anne, with straining eyes, "you will let me have it now, won't you?"

"Certainly not," she replied. "I shall show it to your uncle, and shall then send it back to the writer. It is a most improper letter."

Poor little Anne!

But, after all, was not Claudia most to be pitied? Every word of that loving letter had gone keen to her passionate heart, a barbed arrow, which would not be withdrawn. She was athirst for revenge.

"Sweet is revenge—especially to women"—

according to Byron's version of Juvenal.

"I am very much ashamed of you, Anne," she continued, after a pause, "a mere child like you. I could not have believed you

were so sly and cunning as to carry on a clandestine correspondence."

Anne was silent. She was too prostrated to defend herself from such a charge, or to plead her father's authority for her engagement to Stephen. I think Claudia's feelings of revenge ought by this time to have been satisfied, but it is a passion insatiable. And, by evil hap, the Panther's eye caught among the ladylike trifles upon her centre table, among smelling-flasks and inkstands and gem-cases and *bonbonnières*, a small jewelled riding-whip. She took it up.

"Come with me to your own room, Anne," she said. "I shall punish you, and you will go to bed."

Poor little Anne! Have you ever seen a wasp catch flies, reader? Sweet Anne Page was as powerless in the hands of the Panther as a fly in the clutches of a wasp. I don't think Claudia hurt her very much, but the humiliation was too cruel. What young lady, engaged to be married, would like to be whipt and sent to bed—even if she deserved it? And really our poor little heroine did not deserve it.

Claudia felt a good deal better on her return to her own room. She put the letter in an envelope and sent it back to Stephen. And she told what had occurred to her Uncle Walter and Winifred, who mildly approved. And when, at dessert that day, Sir Arthur missed "that pretty child," she said—

"Oh, she has been naughty to-day, Sir Arthur. She has been sent to bed."

It was an ineffable luxury to Claudia to humiliate, to persecute, to subject to mental and physical pain, the girl for whom she had been rejected by Stephen Langton.

About the middle of the month Humphrey Morfill appeared on the scene from Cambridge. As the Rector and Dr. Winter were on good terms—and as Claudia had encouraged Humphrey's visits at Idlechester—it would have been difficult to prevent his having some intercourse with Anne Page. But the Panther had no such intention. She wisely considered that the great thing to be done was to efface from her cousin's mind the memory of Stephen. Humphrey, she thought, was not dangerous; and Humphrey could occupy Anne with a little harmless semi-flirtation till Raphael's much-desired advent. Accordingly, Anne's schoolroom imprisonment was relaxed, and the governess went away to spend her Christmas with her relations—that is, if governesses have relations; and Humphrey Morfill used to look in pretty often at the Rectory, though not quite so often as Sir Arthur.

Humphrey was ambitious and astute. He did not know that any engagement, authorised or unauthorised, existed between Stephen and Anne, although it was clear to him that there was some sort of understanding. But, if he had known of their betrothal, he would have cared little, deeming all things fair in

love and war. To this young man, eager above everything to rise in the world, it had occurred that to marry Anne Page would be of immense service to him. He knew that gold has a power of floatation in the ocean of life akin to that of cork in the actual ocean. He had conversed much with the little Page at Idlechester; had done his best to open her mind; and had come to the conclusion that it would not break her heart if she did not marry Stephen. He resolved to carry his operations somewhat farther this Christmas vacation. And as the Rector was always busy, and Winifred busier, and the governess absent, and the Panther greatly occupied with the Assyrian baronet, Humphrey had ample opportunities.

He was rather astonished the first morning, when the charming child entered in her short frock and frilled *caleçons*. But he did not exhibit his astonishment. Winifred and Claudia and Sir Arthur were all present: he awaited his opportunity. It soon came. The Saint had parochial business which took her away. The Baronet wanted to skate—had heard of a pond half a mile out of town where the ice was capital—would Claudia come? Wouldn't she? The Panther skated superbly; and by good hap, her maid, Margot, remembered where a pair of her skates might be found. Humphrey found himself left alone with sweet Anne Page—which was just what he wanted. They soon became confidential; and by and by Humphrey ventured to ask the reason of her infantile costume.

"Oh, I don't know," said Anne, blushing. "Claudia wants to make me out a baby. I suppose it's because she's not very young herself."

"I have no doubt," said Humphrey, "she would very much like to be as young and as pretty as you are. But you need not care about it. You look a very charming little girl: only, you know, one fancies you are not too old to be taken on one's knee and kissed."

"Yes,—that horrid Sir Arthur Willesden positively did it one day at dessert. It's just like Claudia, flirting with that man, all because he's a baronet."

"You don't seem very fond of your cousin, Miss Page?" said Morfill.

"Fond of her! If you knew—but oh! I couldn't tell you. I detest her."

"What! isn't she kind to you? No one could be cruel to *you*, surely."

"I don't know what you would call cruel," said the young lady. "I only know I should very much like to do to her what she did to me."

"What was it?" asked Humphrey in the kindest tone. "Tell me. Let me try to help you. No one ought to be cruel to *you*."

This sort of thing was successful at last; and Anne, with much

blushing hesitation, confided to Humphrey the fact that Claudia had actually whipped her; but she would not tell the cause, though he tried very hard to get at it. And he advised her never again to submit to any such indignity, but to ring the bell for the servants, if Claudia threatened her. Which she promised to do, though with a conviction that her courage would fail in the Panther's presence.

"By Jove!" said Morfill to himself, as he walked towards the Grammar School, "that is a verdant little party. I don't wonder at her knocking under to Miss Branscombe, though; she's enough to terrify anybody at all weak-minded. I'll tell you what, sir" —he was talking to himself, a habit of his—"I think I'll marry that child. She doesn't care for Stephen. He's too philosophic and poetic for her. She'll marry anybody who'll put her in long frocks and promise not to whip her. She's a passive—receptive—reflective sort of girl—takes her colouring from the last man that's with her. I'd rather have a girl with a character; but then her money's worth having. If I get it, I can make myself Lord Chancellor. By Jove! I'll marry her."

Humphrey Morfill adhered to the policy which he had marked out for himself. He devoted all his spare time to Anne Page. He won her confidence, and consoled her under her persecutions. Not that she was very much persecuted: Claudia was too fully occupied to trouble herself about her; but she was still treated in the childish fashion, which she disliked. Humphrey was not far wrong in his judgment of her character. Stephen had magnetised her by his imaginative power; but she had just come to an age when the material excitements of the real world attracted her more than Stephen's poetic visions; and Humphrey stimulated her fancy with pictures of London life, balls and evening parties, the undreamt delights of the Opera and the theatres. He knew well what he was about. She "drank the milk of paradise"—that paradise of pretty women, society. She thought it would be delightful to escape from the nursery into the wondrous independence of married womanhood. Therefore she listened to Humphrey with much attention. Stephen, she thought, would never take her beyond Idlechester; he said nothing about those gaieties which Humphrey so eloquently described. I am sorry to say that, as a result of all this, Humphrey hit upon an ingenious arrangement whereby Anne and he could correspond upon his return to Cambridge.

Sweet Anne Page is not to be too severely blamed. It was quite a boy-and-girl engagement between her and Stephen. What child of sixteen can be expected to know her own mind? And Stephen was away; she never saw him; she dared not receive a letter from him, for fear of her cousin Claudia. So she listened to Humphrey, who skilfully carried on the campaign, notwithstanding the keenness of Claudia's eyes. But Claudia was busy with her baronet.

In mid-January Humphrey left "his little wife"—as he already styled her, unrebuked, and Miss Marsden and *Mangnall's Questions* returned. And Sir Arthur Willesden went to town, leaving the Panther plenty of time to look after Anne. And, when the year had advanced a little further, Claudia one day received a letter in a hand she had not seen for an age. Thus it ran:—

"No. —, Clarges Street.

"Dear Claudia,—I have just returned to England, after a few days with the old gentleman, who has got the gout, and is delightfully fierce. I've a deal to do in town, and I want a long talk to you about the position of affairs; so come up and let us converse. Start at once; that's a good girl.

Raphael."

Claudia always obeyed her brother; besides, at this period, she desired the diversion of a trip to London. So having received this letter at the breakfast hour, she at once announced that Raphael had returned, and that she was going to London to meet him, and that, no doubt, he would come back with her. Her uncle and cousin were delighted at the news, and Anne Page opened her ears.

"You will like your Cousin Raphael, Anne," said Claudia condescendingly. "He likes pretty little girls."

Miss Page by no means admired Miss Branscombe's condescension.

The Panther was to start early the next morning; that night she and Winifred had a talk, part of which Anne Page overheard—for "little pitchers have long ears." This was the part—

"Look after Anne, Winifred," said the Panther. "She's very sly. You remember when I caught her corresponding with Stephen?"

"You've not found her out in anything since, have you?"

"No," said Claudia, laughing. "I think this little instrument"—Anne could guess what she took up—"gave her a lesson in the subject that she hasn't forgotten yet. But perhaps she will begin playing her tricks again when my back is turned."

"Do you think Raphael will like her well enough to marry her?" asked Winifred.

"I don't see why not," said the Panther. "She's pretty, you must admit, though it's a very babyish prettiness. She'll improve by and by. Won't he keep her in order if he does marry her!"

"Perhaps she won't have him," suggested Winifred.

"Pshaw! she'll fall in love with him directly. The dear fellow is irresistible," she said with a laugh. "Besides, if she was troublesome, I'd *make* her have him."

This was what Anne Page heard, an interested and terrified eavesdropper. Whence it happened that the mail-coach that took

Miss Branscombe townwards, carried also a letter which branched off somewhere to Cambridge.

"DARLING HUMPHREY,—Cousin Claudia is gone to London, and Cousin Raphael is coming back with her, and *I am to marry him.* I hate him. Nobody can help me but you, Humphrey dear. I am *dreadfully* frightened, *dreadfully.*—Your own little wife, ANNE PAGE."

Which epistle, in due course reaching St. John's College, took a certain undergraduate rather aback.

"What's to be done now, sir?" said Humphrey to Morfill in the solitude of his rooms. "I mustn't let this little party slip through my fingers. That Miss Branscombe's so determined, she'd compel the little fool to marry him, and Anne *is* such a little fool, she'd do it if they threatened to whip her for refusing, and, moreover—from all I hear—Mr. Raphael Branscombe is an experienced and successful practitioner in lovemaking. If he get's down there, you're done, Mr. Morfill, that's obvious. And, as you've got no money, I don't quite see what you're to do. Suppose we have a pipe together, and ruminate."

The result of his rumination was that he started that very day for Idlechester, and rather astonished Stephen Langton by looking him up in Little College Green.

CHAPTER XII.

AIAIE.

RAPHAEL acted on his valet's advice, crossed from St. Malo, and, spending as little time as possible in Jersey, took the mail-steamer for the sister island. And, as he walked up the steps of the pier at Guernsey, one of the first figures that caught his eye was his father's tall and portly form. Ralph Branscombe was enjoying his customary matutine stroll.

"Well, sir," said Raphael, walking up to him, "here I am at last, you see."

"Ah," responded his father, looking at his son from head to foot, as if to ascertain whether he was really the right person. "Well, I'm not sorry to see you. You don't look as if you'd been quite as ill as that rascal of yours pretended."

"He's a capital liar," said Raphael. "I don't think I have had even a headache since I had the pleasure of seeing you last."

"And may one inquire how you have been amusing yourself?" asked Devil Branscombe.

"I found some rather shy game," he replied. "Oh, I have been amused, I assure you. But, with your permission, I'll go and have some breakfast; I'm as hungry as a hunter."

Ralph Branscombe took his son to his rooms on the Esplanade. At first he lived at Marshall's Royal Yacht Club Hotel—in those days a pretentious gloomy place, where, with the usual fatuity of hotel-keepers, you were charged six shillings a bottle for wine that you could buy at Greenslade's, just opposite, at eighteen shillings a dozen. When he had decided to wait for his son in this happy island, beyond the reach of temptation and creditors, Ralph Branscombe took apartments. They were kept by an adipose widow with a couple of daughters, one of whom was so excessively handsome that the old gentleman was almost tempted to make love to her.

"And how do you get on in this tranquil island?" asked Raphael, after he had finished his breakfast, skilfully manufacturing a cigarette the while.

"It is slow—confoundedly slow. And the people are the queerest lot you ever saw. They have a tremendously exclusive aristocracy, Tuppers and Careys and Brocks and Dobrees, who won't look at the unhappy natives that don't belong to their set. Sixties they call themselves; can't guess why."

"Got about sixty pounds a year each, perhaps," suggested Raphael. "But what *is* the place good for?"

"Well, there's scenery, you know, and sea-bathing. And the fish is capital, and so is the fruit. And claret and cognac and cigars are cheap. And there are some deuced pretty girls."

"These are recommendations," said Raphael meditatively. "That was a pretty little party who brought in breakfast just now, but she'll be awfully fat at forty. How do you spend your evenings?"

"There's a club," he replied, "and two or three of the members have satisfactory ideas about van-john and loo. I have been teaching them poker lately."

"You don't dine out, I suppose?"

"The aborigines have not yet reached that stage of civilisation. From what I hear, they invite people to tea."

"Frightful barbarism!" said Raphael. "Well, about this marrying scheme of yours—or the Rector's rather. That little Page is a dumpy child, isn't she, just out of the nursery."

"She's pretty," said his father; "Claudia thinks her charming. And four thousand a year is worth having."

"True. I'll go over and see her, and if she's not very bad style, I may marry her. Will Claudia marry that young Langton?"

"She agreed to the arrangement."

"I don't half like it. She's too good for that sort of fellow. However, I'll see all about it when I go down there."

"You'll stay here a day or two, I suppose," said Ralph. "It's a luxury to get some one to talk to."

"Is there nobody here that you know?"

"Most of the English people are getting out of the way of their creditors, and prefer Jersey, which is a free and easy sort of place. By the way, there's a man lately come that you may know perhaps, young Hudson; he married a sister of Shottesbrooke's."

"By Jove," exclaimed Raphael, "what brings *him* here? Has he got his wife with him?"

"I believe he has. They are lodging up at a place called the New Ground. Do you know much of him?"

"Never spoke to him. I used to know Lady Æmilia slightly."

That evening the Branscombes went down to the club, and very shortly Mr. Hudson was for the first time introduced. A very negative young fellow was Lady Æmilia's husband; but gold glorified him—deified him in the eyes of some people. He had a very great belief in himself, and always found plenty of toadies to encourage that belief. His inordinate vanity throve on the flattery of men who dined with him and borrowed money of him.

There was not any very lively play this evening—some old fogies had settled down to whist; Devil Branscombe, despairing of anything faster, had joined a party. Raphael was smoking patiently. At last Hudson exclaimed—

"Confound it, this is uncommonly slow. Is there a billiard-room anywhere?"

"Upon my life, I don't know," said Raphael, "I only came here to-day, and unless I see some improvement, I think I shall be off again to-morrow."

"Well, there *must* be a billiard-room," said Hudson. "Let's go round to the hotel and ascertain."

"I have no particular objection," said Raphael. "Are you a good player?"

"Not a very bad one, I think," he replied.

They went away together, and succeeded in finding a billiard-room down a steep flight of stone steps, in which St. Peter's Port abounds.

"We'll put a sovereign on the game," said Hudson, "if you like."

"Just as you please," answered Raphael carelessly.

Hudson was an average player, and the Seraph had not touched a cue for some months. The former went ahead at first; but when he was thirty-seven to Raphael's thirteen, the Seraph made a break, and scored his fifty with perfect ease.

"I must give you odds," he remarked mildly. This sort of thing didn't suit Hudson, who liked winning. So after another game, he said—

"Suppose we go up to my rooms, and see if we can get some supper? I daresay my wife finds it rather slow."

"Very well," said the Seraph. "I have met Lady Æmilia before now. I used to know the old Earl."

"By Jove," observed Hudson, "she'll be delighted to meet an old acquaintance."

"Shouldn't wonder," soliloquised the Seraph.

The New Ground is a rectangular piece of turf, with gravel walks and some tolerable trees. The houses in its vicinity look as if they had been built for barracks. There are two or three occupied as lodging-houses; and in the largest of these, a corner house, Mr. Hudson had taken apartments. From the windows there was a fine view over the sea, a mile distant. He and Raphael toiled up Smith Street and the Candie Road, and at length reached this elevated part of the suburbs. When they entered the drawing-room there was no one there, although lights were burning.

"Can't be gone to bed yet," said Hudson. "I'll go and fetch her."

"Don't disturb Lady Æmilia on my account," urged Raphael with great indifference.

Mr. Hudson found his way to his wife's room. I regret to say the lady in question was "in a temper." She had not been many months married; she knew no one in the island; and she had been sitting in solitary weariness while her husband lost his sovereigns at billiards.

Bouverie Hudson was a good deal afraid of his wife. She was a thorough aristocrat; she was divinely beautiful; she was aristocratically indolent. He felt his insignificance in her presence. He was particularly proud of her, feeling that he had purchased one of the finest women in the market—a London Circassian of high price. But he was not particularly fond of a *tête-à-tête* with her.

"I have brought you a visitor, Æmilia," he said.

"Have you? How kind! Some vulgar young islander, I suppose, who wants some supper."

"Why, no. He may want some supper, but he's neither vulgar nor young. It's a gentleman you know slightly."

"Indeed! Well, I hope he is rather more amusing than you are. Tell me who he is, that I may judge whether he is worth the trouble of going downstairs again."

"It is Mr. Raphael Branscombe," said Bouverie.

She did not reply for a moment; the news had been sudden. Then she said languidly—

"Ah, he will be a change. Well, go down and entertain him. I will come presently." This she uttered in her most lazily imperious tone.

But, when her husband had left her, she locked the door, threw herself on her knees at the foot of the bed, and exclaimed—

"Oh, my God, why have you let this man come here? What

have I done to be so tortured? O Raphael, Raphael, how I love you! and yet how I hate you! What shall I do? What shall I do?"

At last she arose and cooled her eyes and forehead, and threw a lace shawl over those white marble shoulders, and descended, looking like a queen; and very calm and steady was the voice in which she said—

"I am glad to see you again, Mr. Branscombe."

Supper was served, and over a good bottle of claret the Seraph and Hudson got on amicably enough.

"By the way," said Raphael, "isn't there an island called Sark one ought to see—a place with cliffs and caverns, and that sort of thing?"

"Oh yes," said Lady Æmilia. "Suppose we go across to-morrow, if it's fine. Your father will join us, I daresay, Mr. Branscombe."

"To-morrow is rather too sharp," said Hudson. "We shall have to take provisions; there's nothing on the island but lobsters and rabbits."

"Very well; suppose we fix it for early the next morning." said Raphael. "My man, Louis, is a capital caterer; he shall look up provisions. We'll inquire about a boat the first thing to-morrow."

Thus it was arranged, the Seraph and Hudson making an appointment to meet in the Market before breakfast; and then he started for the Esplanade, having parted from Æmilia with just one pressure of the hand.

"She's a wonderfully fine woman," thought Raphael to himself, as he smoked his cigar, passing beneath the Bailiff's garden wall; "and she cares about as much as I do for that prig of a Bouverie Hudson; but I must be careful. When those languid creatures get possessed with the devil of love, they are infernally troublesome; and there's Anne Page waiting for me, and poor little Fiordilisa."

I think at that moment the Seraph wished himself back at Isola Rossa again.

Louis was waiting for him. Devil Branscombe had not yet got away from his whist. The Seraph gave his valet some orders about the Sark expedition and dismissed him. Then he sat by the window, watching the moonlight upon the sea and a flood of glistening silver, and reflected on his position. It was rather an amusing one.

By and by—he heard a tap at the door, and said, "Come in!" —entered the widow's prettiest daughter. She wanted to know what time he would like to breakfast.

"What's your name, child?" asked the Seraph.

"Ellen, sir."

"Ah. And pray, Miss Nelly, what time does my respected father generally breakfast?"

"About twelve, sir."

"Amazing old gentleman! And what time do you breakfast, Nelly?"

"At eight, sir."

"Good. Then you may bring me up a cup of coffee when you breakfast, and mind you make it strong; that's a good girl, and mind you bring it yourself, for I know you'll look so confoundedly fresh and pretty in the morning, you'll give me an appetite."

Ellen blushed. She was only nineteen, this little girl, though her fine development caused her to look several years older. There's a good deal of flirtation in those islands, and she was not wholly ignorant of the art. And the Seraph's unique beauty of person fascinated her.

"Come here, Nelly," he said. She approached him, and he gave her what he called a fraternal kiss. "There, good night, little girl. Don't forget the coffee."

His father, who had let himself in with a latch-key, had been an amused spectator of this brief scene.

"You get on fast, Raphael," he remarked. "I fear you don't improve. Now, Ellen, be off to bed, or I'll tell your mamma of your naughtiness."

"The Hudsons and I are going to Sark the day after to-morrow," said the Seraph. "Will you come? How can we get a boat?"

"I can find you a clipping little cutter-yacht that will just do. I want to see Sark, but certainly shouldn't have made any great effort in that direction."

The following day the necessary arrangements were made: and the party was increased by two persons. These were a Mr. and Mrs. Wugk, who, notwithstanding their queer name, were tolerably English. Wugk was a musician of Flemish descent, but born in England—a man of real genius as a composer, but unutterably lazy. Mrs. Wugk was a native of Guernsey, and one of the most charming of the island beauties. Ralph Branscombe had made Wugk's acquaintance at the club; and encountering him in the Market, enlisted him for the trip. He was a capital comrade, knowing the island well—and of course Lady Æmilia would be glad of a feminine companion.

So in due time they started, a pleasant party; and were landed in Sark, an island where landing is difficult—so difficult indeed that the Lords of the Admiralty are said to have come there on a tour of inspection, and to have gone away again without discovering where the harbour lay. The legend is not incredible; the tunnel by which you must approach the interior is quite invisible from the sea. I have always fancied that Circe's mystical island must have been very like Sark. But there were no painters in water-colours in Homer's days, whereas Sark has been fortunate in an artist of the Channel, Mr. Paul

Naftel, who has done upon canvas, for its cliffs and bays, what words can never do. Its caverns are wondrous. The Gouliots are famous for their population of zoophytes, many very rare; a perfect tapestry of these creatures, blood-red and yellow and olive-green, hides the rugged walls. But the Boutiques are transcendently fine. After scrambling through tortuous passages in half-darkness, it is glorious to come out upon a platform of rock beneath a Titanic portal open to the ocean. Surely the sons of Poseidon dwelt in those colossal halls, and looked forth upon the solitary waste of waters. Does that single white sail in the distance carry Odysseus and his heroic followers across the wine-coloured sea?

Our party stayed longer in the island than they at first intended. The wind changed, so that they could not easily get back to Guernsey—and they thoroughly enjoyed the beautiful loneliness of the place. It is a charming islet for lovers of laziness and scenery—of lobsters and rabbits. Louis exhibited his culinary skill, and produced a marvellous variety of capital dishes from these materials only.

One day they started to see the Boutiques—all but Devil Branscombe, who had a touch of gout, and was smoking in bed. You go along a broad green terrace above the sea; the steep grassy slope beneath grows steeper as it descends to the brink of the cliff. This is on your right; presently you pass an opening on your left, which gives you a view right *through* the island. A little farther the path narrows and grows steeper; and then you have to descend and reascend in a way which Alpine clubmen would think a trifle, but which perplexes weak nerves. Hudson and Lady Æmilia were in advance; then Wugk and his wife; finally Raphael.

Suddenly there was a pause.

"I can't stand this," said Hudson. "I'm getting giddy. You'd better turn back, Æmilia."

"Indeed I shall do nothing of the kind. I came out to see the caves, and I mean to see them. If you are giddy, go back and wait; Mr. Wugk will take care of me, and Mr. Branscombe of Mrs. Wugk."

Hudson acceded to this arrangement; but presently Mrs. Wugk's courage also failed, so Raphael brought her back and left her with Hudson.

"Lady Æmilia can't come to much harm now," said the Seraph, "as there will be two of us to take care of her."

The trio made their way through the caverns, standing at last upon a great ocean-threshold, with a gateway of giants above. It was a strangely beautiful way to approach that vast stretch of hyaline. A sail or two, far off—a seamew or two, nearer at hand—no other sign of life. The golden sunlight slept upon an immeasurable waste of blue.

To return was found rather harder work than entry had been.

They were getting on very well, however, when Lady Æmilia felt faint, and was unable to proceed. After some little discussion, Raphael said—

"You see, she's afraid to go on. We must get a boat round. I'll go and see to it, if you'll stay with Lady Æmilia."

"No, no," she said. "Let Mr. Wugk go—he knows the island better—he will be quicker."

And Wugk, seeing no objection to the arrangement, went.

"Well," thought Raphael, "she is determined to have a *tête-à-tête* with me. I deserve a scolding, no doubt, and I suppose she means to give me one."

He found her a comfortable seat of the everlasting granite, and then lighted a cigarette.

"Why did you come here, Raphael?" she asked after a time.

"Not to see you, child. I had filial duties to perform. Having performed them, I mean to be off."

"I wish you were drowning in that water, Raphael. I should like to watch you sinking, and know that I could save you if I liked."

"And not do it, of course, amiable girl! Tell me now, what harm have I done you?"

"Did not you make me love you? Is that no harm, when you cared nothing for me, when I had to marry another man?"

"Well, you don't seem to have much love for me now; and as that is the case, and as you have a husband with plenty of money, I again say I have done you no harm."

"What, there is no harm in remorse—no harm in lying beside a husband I detest—no harm in being a murderess! I *am* a murderess, if longing to do murder makes one. I want to be away from these tempting cliffs. I fear—oh, I fear I shall push *him* over the brink some day."

"Really, Æmilia," he said calmly, "you are very foolish. You are a perfect child to talk all this nonsense. Hudson seems a very good fellow—try and be comfortable with him."

"Yes, that's it—that's the way you talk. Oh, why couldn't I guess all this before I loved you? You win a woman's love—you win a woman who is your slave, who would die for you, who cares for no other creature in the wide world, and then you crush her and throw her away, caring no more for her than for the end of a cigar. Oh, I know *now;* but why can't girls know in time, before they begin to love men with the beauty of devils and with ten times more cruelty?"

Raphael was taken aback by this torrent of words. He said nothing, but wished the boat would come round; and by good luck so it did, within five minutes.

"If I kill him it is your doing," she whispered, as they advanced towards the boat.

"Tired of waiting?" shouted Hudson cheerily. "Catch me going to see caverns again!"

Next day the wind shifted, and they got back to Guernsey, no murder having as yet been committed. And the day after, Raphael took the mail-steamer to Southampton, resolving to leave Lady Æmilia to her own devices. And, as we have seen, Claudia heard of him from Clarges Street.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN ELOPEMENT.

SWEET Anne Page was exceedingly dissatisfied with what she had done. She was a timorous creature, and had written to Humphrey in a fright, and now was in a fright as to the result. Anne was a parasitic plant—a clinging creature, unable to stand alone. Her heart was a treasure of sweetness, which she was glad to bestow on any one who seemed to deserve it. Humphrey Morfill had accurately estimated her receptive and reflective character. With Stephen she was thoughtful and dreamy; with Humphrey she was gay and vivacious; and at both times she was happy. But now her letter had filled her with remorse and terror. She thought of Stephen, whom her father had deemed worthy to wed her. With a pang of regret she thought of Humphrey, to whom she had offered herself in sudden fear, with utter dismay. What should she do? Of whom should she ask counsel? If Claudia had not left Kingsleat, I believe Anne would have thrown herself at her feet and confessed everything, for she had faith in her cousin, while she feared her; but for her uncle Walter and Winifred she had only fear, no faith.

She sat in the schoolroom at the Rectory, thinking of these things, in her hand some dreary volume of lessons, which she was supposed to be learning. Not a word was visible to her troubled eyes. Stiff Miss Marsden sat opposite her, doing some ridiculous feminine work. The forenoon was a bright one, softening towards spring; and poor little childish Anne, if there had been anybody to love and guide her, would have been as good and as happy a girl as you would wish to see on a spring morning. Immured in a schoolroom, tortured with long lessons, threatened with a marriage to some one she had never seen, she was thoroughly miserable. Anne always dreaded people she did not know, and always loved people whom she knew ever so little, if they would let her. If the Raphael Branscombe who terrified her could have entered at this moment, he might easily have won her from both her boyish wooers.

"Are you ready with your lesson, my dear?" asked the governess, in the chill voice of the species.

Anne started, conscious of her naughtiness. She did not even know what book she had in her hand. It turned out to be a work by the ingenious M. Le Page, with this sort of thing in it—"Joséphine, je viens d'inviter M. L. à déjeûner, qu'as tu à nous donner? Du jambon, des côtelettes, du fromage, et de la crême avec le café. Il y a en bas des œufs tout frais, on peut ajouter une omelette." Breaking down over "*jambon*," Anne burst into tears.

"You are not well, my dear, I am afraid," said the governess. "Have you a headache? Would you like to go and lie down?"

Anne assented to the proposition, glad to obtain solitude. When she reached her own room she locked the door, and sat down and tried to think; but she was in no state to decide what she ought to do. Always trustful and irresolute, she was at this moment pliant as a reed. She could come to no decision. There was no one she could ask. She could only moan and sob, and wish sometimes for Stephen, sometimes for Humphrey, sometimes even for Claudia—and often, ah, how often, poor child, for her lost father.

There came a tap at the door.

"They can't let me alone," she murmured fretfully. "I shall have to take some gruel, or some senna, or something. I am very wretched."

She opened the door, and there entered—not, as she expected, her cousin or the governess—but the parlour-maid, Rebecca. She was a wonderful smart young person, with a fly-away air, and a taste for cherry-coloured ribbons. Humphrey, guessing that the wearer of such finery was corruptible, had made her his messenger by occasional half-crowns, and on this occasion she brought Anne a letter from him.

"My poor little pet, I will save you. Come down into the garden this evening at eleven, or as soon after as you can. Becky will open the side-door for you. Don't be afraid. Put on your bonnet and shawl, as it is very cold.

"Just tell Becky to say—yes.—Your loving

"HUMPHREY."

"*Yes*, Becky," said Anne emphatically, so delighted with definite guidance that she did not hesitate a moment.

"You've been crying, miss," said Becky familiarly. "I wouldn't, if I were you. There's nobody dare put upon you, now Miss Claudia is gone. You're a better lady than any of 'em."

This well-meant speech was made in consequence of Humphrey's orders to Becky to advise Miss Page to keep up her spirits; but as she went downstairs the flighty *cameriste* said to herself—

"Silly little chit! What does she want crying there like a baby? I'm sure I don't wonder at Miss Claudia's whipping her.

I wonder what Mr. Humphrey can see in *her*—but *there*, she's got money."

And Becky tossed her cherry-coloured cap-ribbons, and thought, if *she* had money, how the young men would all be after her. And by and by she managed to slip out and convey the affirmative monosyllable to Morfill, who was lying perdu at a public-house near the Rectory, and who gave Becky a sovereign and certain directions to which she promised attention.

Humphrey, as we have said, had gone straight to Idlechester, and to Stephen's rooms. He found his old friend in a dreamy, melancholy mood.

"Well, old boy," he said, "you seem dull in these queer rooms of yours. Do you stay here all day? Why don't you wake up a little?"

"Oh, I go out often enough," replied Stephen. "But I am rather dull, I confess."

"No wonder. And it's entirely your own fault; your money makes you independent. Why not go to college?—you'll be jolly enough there."

"I don't want to be jolly," said Stephen. "But what brings you here in the middle of term? Anything the matter?"

"Well," said Humphrey hesitatingly, "the fact is this. I want you to do me, if you can, a great favour. I want to borrow two hundred pounds for about three months. And you must trust to my honour: I cannot tell you what I want it for—only there's a lady in the case."

"You can have it to-morrow morning as soon as the bank opens," said Stephen. "And now, what shall we do this evening?"

"I'm going to stay here," said Morfill, "and, what's more, I mean to sleep on your sofa, if you'll let me. I don't wish it generally known that I am not at Cambridge And, by the way, if you are going out at all, stroll down to the Half Moon, and hear if anybody talks about me. I got off the coach half a mile from town, and don't think I was recognised."

Stephen did as he was told, and found that Humphrey had not quite succeeded in maintaining his incognito.

"Why, there's an old friend of yours in town, Mr Stephen," said Jack Winslow. "How is it he's not with you?"

"I have no friends, Miss Winslow, old or new," said Stephen solemnly.

"Oh, don't talk such stuff! But you can't mean to say you haven't seen Mr. Morfill?"

"My dear Jack, I regret to find that you are losing your sanity. Is it incipient *D. T.*, and must I warn that respectable old gentleman whom you condescend to acknowledge as papa that it is time you were sent to the County Lunatic Asylum? Your head should be shaved, and you should be put in a strait waistcoat."

"What nonsense you are talking! I tell you Mr. Morfill came in by this evening's coach, and I want to know what he has come for."

"I should think you did. So should I if I thought he was here. Is it likely he'd leave Cambridge in the middle of term?"

"I don't know what's likely," said Jack. "I only know Harry Tipper says he saw him."

"Did you ever know Harry drive that last stage sober? Says he saw him! Saw old Vosper the butcher, that weighs twenty stone, and thought he was such a genteel young man, he must be fresh from the University."

Thus cunningly did Stephen attempt to conceal his rival from observation, little guessing the direction of Humphrey's designs. And the next morning he drew from the bank two hundred pounds, which he handed to his friend; and Humphrey got quietly away, leaving Stephen under the impression that he was going back to Cambridge. Instead of this, he made his way to Kingsleat, and entered into negotiations with his old ally of the cherry-coloured ribbons.

The evening was dull at the Rectory. The evenings always were so, now that the brilliant Claudia had departed, and there was no "swell" baronet dropping in to flirt with her. The Rector and his daughter lived *tête-à-tête*, and with the dessert entered our little friend Anne, demure and infantile, plump and *petite*, still in the short frocks and fringed pantaloons to which she had been relegated by the persecuting Panther. When they went to the drawing-room, Winifred was wont to sit by the fire and read some saintly book, while Anne looked out of the window till it became too dark to see anything. Then the Rector came and had his coffee, and read the London morning paper, which reached Idlechester about eight o'clock. He was a taciturn man, who seldom found in his journal anything to talk about. Some children would have found pabulum in the books, illustrated and otherwise, in which the house abounded. Stephen, for example, would have been only too content to be thus let alone but Anne was a social creature, who pined for a loving voice and a protecting arm. She did not care to read, but would listen by the hour if any one read to her. Her sweetness was like the fragrant spirit of the limoncina tree, which yields itself to the caressing hand.

This evening seemed interminable. Anne thought the Rector would never come to the drawing-room—that he would never have finished his *Morning Chronicle*—that the time for prayers would never arrive. But it came at last; and, as the Rev. Walter Branscombe's sonorous voice read the evening lesson, Anne was fascinated by the cherry-coloured cap ribbons gleaming amid the line of servants. But at last there was an end; and Anne, after the ordinary evening embraces, was, according to custom, accompanied to her room by Miss Marsden, who always

made her kneel down and say a hymn in her presence. And in time the governess departed, and Anne waited in a frightful state of fidgettiness, of ineffable terror, for eleven o'clock to come, and for Becky to assure her that all was safe.

It was about five minutes past the hour when Becky cautiously opened the door, and found Anne in a terrible state of alarm and anticipation.

"Now, miss," she whispered, energetic in the expectation of future sovereigns, "slip on your cloak and bonnet—it's a dreadfully frosty night. Mr. Humphrey's waiting."

Anne could do nothing for herself. Becky wrapped her up and led her trembling down the back stairs to a side door which opened on the garden. She could scarcely stand. But waiting at the door was Humphrey Morfill, who took her in his arms and kissed her.

"My darling!" he said, "I want you to come with me. I have a carriage waiting. I will make you my wife to-morrow."

She did not understand him. She lay almost insensible in his arms.

"It's no good talking to her, Mr. Humphrey," whispered the practical parlour-maid—"she's frightened to death almost. You put her in the coach and take her away—and that's what you do."

Humphrey acted on this excellent advice. He lifted Anne into the postchaise, and off it flew along the hard, frosty road. Becky went back to the house, fastened the side door with quiet deliberateness, and did not look at Morfill's parting gift till she reached her room. It was a ten-pound note, and she had expected only five.

"Well," she said, "he's a generous young fellow, and deserves a better wife than that poor thing. She *is* a baby, if I ever saw one."

Becky had locked the door of Anne's room, and removed the key. It was Miss Marsden's custom in the morning, when herself dressed, to go to her pupil's room, and see that she was properly attired, and cause her to repeat another hymn—the most punctual of young persons, she never failed to be at Anne's door at eight precisely.

The door was locked, and Anne did not open it.

"The child must be ill," said the governess. "How silly of her to lock her door. I must tell Miss Branscombe."

But Winifred was in her bath, and did not mean to be disturbed for anything, and, when the governess reiterated her raps at the door, exclaimed in an unsaintly way—

"Wait, can't you?"

When her toilet was a trifle more advanced, she threw on a loose wrapper, and, appearing on the landing, said to the governess—

"Well, what is it?"

"Miss Page's door is locked, and we can't make her hear. I am afraid she's ill. She complained of headache yesterday."

"Pooh! There's nothing the matter with her—she's very sly. Tell her you'll punish her if she doesn't open the door."

Miss Marsden conveyed the threat, but of course nothing came of it, and at last the Rector was aroused by the unusual noise. He had the door forced open. We are already aware of what he was likely to find.

There was poor little Anne's bed, unslept in. The room was tidy as usual—just as tidy as when she had knelt down and said her hymn to the governess the night before. There was nothing to prate of her whereabouts. Nor could any creature in the Rectory, except the maiden of the cherry-coloured cap-ribbons, guess what had become of her. The Rector was utterly perplexed, and could not tell what in the world to do. He felt no disposition to publish abroad the fact that his ward was missing, so at length he determined to wait awhile, and see if she returned.

But during the morning the rumour of her disappearance travelled beyond the Rectory walls into the town of Kingsleat. And it encountered and coalesced with another rumour, which was that a postchaise with four horses, from the Mitre, had taken Mr. Humphrey Morfill and a female companion a stage out of Kingsleat, on the North road.

As when acid meets alkali, and neutral salt is formed, so these two rumours combined to form a third—that Mr. Morfill had run away with Miss Page. The Rector heard this at last, and started for the Mitre to question the landlord of that ancient hotel and posting house. On his way he was joined by Dr. Winter, who had heard the same rumour, and had started on the same errand.

Stout, old, rubicund Dawson, when these two magnates of the town, both clergymen, and one a country magistrate, came to ask him what he knew of the matter, would have turned pale if it had been possible. He told them all he knew—which was that Mr. Morfill had engaged post horses late the previous evening, and that they started between eleven and twelve, and that they had since returned. A postboy was called in, and stated that they took Mr. Morfill and a lady to Radford, and that he got fresh horses at the Bell, and went on immediately.

"Didn't you think there was something wrong, Dawson," said Dr. Winter, "when a mere boy like my nephew ordered post-horses?"

"No, sir," replied Dawson. "The young gentleman has always been so very steady, I took his order just as soon as if it was yours."

The two clergymen left the hotel, convinced that the thing was done, and that no interference could avail.

"You call your nephew a mere boy," said the Rector. "Is he of age?"

"He is twenty-two," said Winter. "This is a sad business for you, of course, but for me it is worse. That boy was my adopted son; I thought him incapable of meanness and dishonour; I hoped that he would have a noble career. Now I hope never to see him again. I thank God he is not my son."

"You are too harsh, my dear friend," replied the Rector. "He is a fine intelligent young man, and though his conduct has been inexcusable, I would not give him up altogether. Young men are not always amenable to reason when there is a lovely girl in the case. He may have a fine career before him yet."

"I cannot agree with you," said Dr. Winter briefly.

The Rector went home, with a great deal of correspondence on his hands. He wrote to Mr. Drax and to Raphael. Winifred poured out her indignation to Claudia in a letter inexplicably crossed. The Panther's feelings on receiving it may easily be imagined. And Raphael was not at home that morning—had gone off to Richmond the previous afternoon, and had not returned—so that she could find nobody to sympathise with her, but walked up and down the Clarges Street drawing-room in impotent anger. The idea of that little Anne Page serving them such a trick—and with Humphrey Morfill, too, whom she had believed quite safe. And now Stephen Langton, who had rejected her, would be almost a rich man, with half Mr. Page's money. Claudia could not resist telling Sir Arthur Willesden of the affair, when the baronet paid a morning visit.

"Aw—by Jove!" said the baronet, "how interesting! Why, Miss Page—aw—was quite a child I think—short frocks—aw—and all that sort of thing. I wish—aw—that I could be the hero—aw—of an elopement, Miss Branscombe."

"Do you? I wish I had the heroine of this elopement here," said the Panther, looking anything but amiable.

"Well—aw—let us hope she will never repent it."

"She will; she *shall*. She shall be sorry for it every day of her life."

Claudia did not quite see how to fulfil this tremendous threat, but felt that she should like to realise it. Sir Arthur, finding his charmer in rather a terrifying humour this morning, did not prolong his visit.

Raphael did not see his sister till late. He dined out, but found her awaiting him at eleven, when he returned. She brought out her news at once.

"Anne Page has run away with young Morfill, Raphael!"

He looked rather pleased than otherwise.

"When did that happen?" he asked.

"The night before last. They must be married by this time."

"Of course. It does young Morfill credit. You see he was not quite such a fool as you thought him, Claudia. Well, I need not go down to Kingsleat now."

"You take it very coolly."

"Why not? Morfill plays ace of trumps and I lose the trick. Am I to spoil my hair by tearing it? The cleverest of women, Claudia—and you are the cleverest I ever met—ruin their game by temper. You are angry now with everybody—with Mr. and Mrs. Morfill for beating you, with me for not going down in time to stop it, with yourself for not perceiving that the little girl had an understanding with Morfill. This is foolish; or rather, it is womanish, and you, my poor Claudia, cannot help being a woman."

"You are very provoking, Raphael."

"I am philosophical, that is all. Now I shall be spared the nuisance of going out of town just as the season is beginning. And I don't see that you need return, unless, indeed, you think of marrying that young Langton, who is really worth having now."

Claudia did not reply. She was always a little alarmed when Raphael approached this subject.

The news did not take long in travelling to Idlechester. Stephen, lounging past the Half Moon in the afternoon, was called in by the landlord, who had just heard the story from some of the Kingsleat folk. He was perfectly astounded. Himself trustful and worthy of trust, he could not believe in Morfill's having thus acted. And to borrow money of him for the purpose! It was incredible.

Alas, the incredible is too often the true—especially when human character is the basis of our incredulity. Stephen found the evidence too strong for him. He sat down in the inn parlour, and drank a glass of port wine which kind-hearted Jack Winslow got for him.

"It can't be true," he said to himself.

"It's no good to take on so," said the bright-eyed barmaid, eager to console him. "There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

"I shall never marry, Jack," he said. "I believed in Anne; I can never believe in anybody else. And I trusted Morfill too; he was my friend. There is no such thing as friendship in the world, or love either."

"What ought I to do, Jack?" he said after a time. "I'm a mere boy, you know; I don't know what a man ought to do. I suppose Mr. Branscombe now would shoot him."

"Don't talk in that cruel way," she said. "The Branscombes ain't men and women, from all I hear! they've no hearts in their bodies. You leave Mr. Humphrey alone; you'd only break Miss Anne's heart if you were to kill him; and perhaps you would be killed yourself."

"I should like that," said Stephen calmly.

A day or two later, when letters had arrived from Humphrey—plausible letters, admirably concocted, but which deceived nobody—the great Mr. Drax fixed a time for reading the sealed

codicil, and Stephen found himself the possessor of an additional two thousand a year. He wanted to decline it in favour of her whom we must now call Mrs. Morfill, but Mr. Drax assured him this was out of the question.

"Humphrey Morfill is better off than he deserves," said the lawyer, and his auditors fully agreed with him.

When the first shock was over, Stephen thought a great deal about Claudia. He recollected her threat that he should never marry Anne Page. Had she contrived this elopement? It seemed impossible, but he had learned to doubt impossibilities. And then he vividly recalled the Panther's beauty and brilliancy—and that strange moment when she flung herself into his arms—and wondered whether she really hated him now. The idea of being loved by such a creature—a woman wholly different from all other women of his experience—a woman whom he found himself comparing with those imperious and terrible beauties who lived in the maddening atmosphere of the Rome of the Cæsars—was in itself a fascination. He did not love her as he had loved the honey-sweet girl who had been stolen from him; but how fine it would be to tame such a glorious creature, to possess her, to make a slave of one who seemed born to be mistress and queen. It was a cruel lust of conquest that he felt—not love.

And having ascertained that she was likely to remain in London, he resolved to go thither. Stephen had never seen London; his world lay within a radius of twenty miles or less, round Idlechester Cathedral. He would go to London. He communicated his intention to the great Mr. Drax, whom in his boyhood he had regarded with reverent awe, but who was now assiduously affable to his young client; and Mr. Drax recommended him to go to the Chapter Coffee-house in St. Paul's Churchyard, and wrote down for him a few memoranda of guidance.

I suppose, in describing the effects of Anne Page's evasion, I have permitted time enough to elapse for her to reach Gretna and become Mrs. Morfill. She was helpless when the post-chaise started. Humphrey held her in his arms, and comforted her, and at Radford, where they first changed horses, he made her take a little brandy. He had no fear of pursuit, feeling pretty sure of about eight hours' start. At the first possible place, and after daylight had arrived, he purchased some additional wrappages for Anne; he had taken her away with only a light cloak thrown over her ordinary dress. It was a cold, long, dreary ride; but with hot coffee at every stage, he contrived to keep her from freezing; and she slept in his arms like a child through a great part of the journey.

At last they crossed the Border, and reached the dwelling of the blacksmith priest, and were welded together in his rough fashion, Anne rather unresisting than consenting. In the presence of a strong will she was powerless. She was doing wrong,

she knew; she dreaded to think of Stephen, of Claudia; but she could not oppose Humphrey. So Mr. and Mrs. Morfill duly reached the Bush Hotel at Carlisle, and sat down together to an excellent dinner, amid the suppressed amusement of chambermaids and the like. For be it remembered that Anne was still in frock and frilled *caleçons*, looking quite a child. But this was a trifle, which by the landlady's kind help was soon amended.

Humphrey wrote a series of letters to the Rector, to Mr. Drax, to his uncle, to Stephen. The Rector replied formally and ceremoniously, expressing his extreme regret that his niece's character had been injured by a runaway marriage, and hoping that Mr. Morfill's future conduct would in some degree evoke amends for his imprudence. Mr. Drax communicated the contents of the codicil, whereat Humphrey was very angry, holding it a great shame that Stephen should have half the property. Dr. Winter wrote a curt severe letter, in which he disowned his nephew entirely, and requested him to refrain from writing to him. Stephen Langton made no answer.

From Carlisle, Humphrey had gone to Wetheral, a beautiful village on the divine river Eden, where he found quiet lodgings. He was too shrewd to spend much money in travelling until he could grasp his wife's property. So he spent a few quiet weeks at this place, which Wordsworth has immortalised, and which De Quincey loved. The red railway bridge over the Eden had not then been built; the only way across to Corby Castle was by Mr. Howard's ferry. Belted Will Howard has forded that river in the rare old days; and there have been border fights there; and perchance Sir William of Deloraine, good at need, has splashed into the roaring torrent.

"To the peers of Scotland woe! when the strong shafts fly like snow—
Such the shout of long ago—
Time of slaughter.

"Ah, the dream is all forgot. One sole beauty of the spot,
Changing ever, changes not—
Eden water."

By whose marge let us leave the runaways to spend their honeymoon.

CHAPTER XIV.

STEPHEN IN LONDON.

STEPHEN went to town by the night mail. He took no leave of his relations, which caused Aunt Harriet, when she heard he was gone, to talk of his "black-hearted ingratitude;" but indeed his brain was in a whirl, Anne Page's unfaithfulness had been so sudden a shock, that he could not collect himself after it. He would hardly have taken formal leave of his kind-hearted *confidante*, Jack Winslow, if that young lady had not been on the spot when the coach started. Indeed, Jack generally saw the mail off, and occasionally, as my readers are aware, drove a stage herself.

In a very dreamy state was Stephen Langton. Idlechester, with its beautiful river, its mighty minster, with patulous elms of immemorial growth about it; its picturesque High Street and Market Cross, in those days unrestored, for Gilbert Scott had not arisen; Mr. Page's house, with its gardens that seemed a fragment of Elysium; his grandfather's house and tanyard, and his grandfather himself—all these things seemed a part of his personal identity. But now, in the broad moonlight, on the box behind four hourses, racing along the London road with wide stretches of undulating chalk down lying bare beneath the moon on either side, Stephen began to think that the Cathedral City was a dream of the past—that there had been no reality in his visions of the Close, the river, the tanyard—that even Claudia Branscombe and Anne Page were creatures of the element. Here are four lines of a poem that the young gentleman had sent to *Fraser* (then in the vigour of its hot youth), which may show something of the state of his mind—

> "And I long through the gloomy gate of the unknown world to go,
> Where truth is whispered, perchance, by angels under their breath;
> For I know not whether the dreams I dream are dreams or no,
> Or whether to die is life, or whether to live is death."

Strange fancies had he nurtured in those quaint rooms in Little College Green; and he had read the opium-dreams of De Quincey, and the fever-fancies of Hoffman. And now, as the long panorama of down and woodland, of sleeping villages and towns, swept swiftly by, he looked upon Idlechester as a dream—upon the present as a dream—and marvelled whether he should still dream on without hope of wakening.

Lo! a blush in the East—Aurora rising bathed in one tingling blush from the couch of Tithonus. Early, before the sordid smoke has had time to veil the beauty of the sleeping city, the mail enters London. Stephen saw it as a great poet had seen it from Westminster Bridge, and thought with Wordsworth, that—

"Earth has not anything to show more fair."

The man who has not looked upon London when—

"The City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning"—

when, in an intense calm that may be felt, "all that mighty heart is lying still," has yet to see one of the most pathetic and majestic sights the world can show.

Stephen, dismounting at one of those dear old Holburn hostelries, was with his luggage rattled in a ramshackle hackney-coach to the Chapter Coffee-house, and, being cold and stiff, and having a fine healthy capacity for sleep, very wisely went to bed. Mr. Drax did well to send him to a place like the Chapter. Young men were seldom seen in that home of middle-aged clergymen and old port; there was nobody who could lead the verdant young visionary astray, whereas, if he had been landed in a Covent Garden hotel, he would soon have been introduced to the vulgar vice of the metropolis; and Stephen was of a temperament only too easily misled. The eye creates beauty, and music is the product of the ear. Stephen's imaginative faculty was of a quality to paralyse his judgment. Any clever *hetaira* might ruin him.

He locked himself into his room with a feeling of intense satisfaction. He always felt a delight in the isolation and independence of the bed-chamber. There, without interruption, he could indulge in sleeping, or in waking dreams. Elia has devoted a delightful essay to the praises of *bed;* but the majority of us do not half enjoy that delicious locality. Thomson, perhaps, best understood its luxury, its infinite resources; and to read *The Castle of Indolence* in bed—the first part, I mean, before the vexatiously-virtuous knight arrives to disturb the enchantment of the place—is a great treat. Well, Stephen, within that quaint old comfortable den in the shadow of St. Paul's, built for himself a city within a city—a microscopic London of the imagination, widely different from the real capital; and he dwelt with his visions till nearly one o'clock, when he descended to look for breakfast.

The coffee-room, amber in its prevailing hue, was deserted. A noble fire was burning; the morning papers lay on a table near it; Stephen contentedly seated himself thereby, and rang for breakfast. Frederic, the head waiter, the most urbane, not to say ecclesiastical of waiters, awaited his orders. Young gentle-

men were rather out of place in this dignified atmosphere; but this young gentleman was recommended by Mr. Drax, of Idlechester, a good customer, an attorney that did business for bishops and deans; so Frederic patronised him. He gave him the hottest and strongest coffee in a silver ewer, the richest cream, the greenest watercresses, the freshest eggs, the thinnest slices of the ruddiest and most toothsome ham. Stephen took his ease in his inn with as much gusto as if he had been Jack Falstaff or Dr. Johnson.

"Would he dine at home?" asked Frederic. He would, and on that affable waiter's suggestion, ordered dinner at six—a bit of fish and a rump-steak and oyster-sauce, and then he started to see London. His first few steps took him into the great Churchyard. Why should not he begin by seeing St. Paul's? He entered, and, by an expenditure of about five shillings, managed to see everything, from the catacombs to the hollow ball at the summit. As he climbed the rude staircase by which the visitor passes through the monstrous timber ribs on which the dome is constructed, he thought of Piranesi, the architect, who in his fever dreams imagined himself climbing endless staircases up through interminable heights of architecture. Stephen reached the ball, and looked from its rectangular openings upon the Lilliputian world below. Now that London is so overcrowded, why should not a colony find airy lodgings in the skeleton of the dome of St. Paul's?

I scarcely know what places the young explorer did not see that day. He went eastward as far as the Tower; he went westward as far as Piccadilly. He returned to Faithfull's cosy quarters dead beat; so long a walk over pavement had thoroughly tired him. But Frederic had remembered him; his table was laid, and, by the time he had eaten his steak and drunk for the first time some of the famous London stout, Stephen was himself again. The waiter, who had taken a fancy to him, actually allowed him to have a bottle of 15s. port; and our hero, sipping this nectar and cracking his filberts, almost forgot Anne Page and the tragical fact that his heart was broken.

Although the other occupants of the coffee-room were chiefly clergymen, they were not devoid of vivacity. Stephen watched with much interest a party of three who dined at a table near him. One of these, a man nearly fifty, but bearing his years as if they were a light load, was evidently facetious almost beyond endurance. When the sweet o' the night came on, and the duller folk retired, and the trio in question had begun to smoke, their laughter had scarcely any intermission. Every now and then Stephen caught snatches of strange rhyme, as thus—

"Sow your poetic oats—
Not to say wild oats;
Give up the petticoats
On which this child dotes!"

By and by these three gentlemen and Stephen were the sole occupants of the room; whereupon the Rhymer said—

"Frederic, bring the materials for a bowl of punch. And," he continued, addressing Stephen, "if you, young gentleman, are not afraid of a splitting headache in the morning, perhaps you'll come over and join us?"

Stephen expressed his pleasure.

"Youth," said the unknown, "seldom enters this mahogany-coloured room, or sees dignitaries of the Church drink good punch and make bad verses. But it may not be unprofitable to you, my young friend, of whose name I am ignorant"——

"Stephen Langton, sir," he interposed.

"An excellent ecclesiastical name—the name of a man to whom England owes much. It may not be unprofitable to you, Mr. Langton, to learn by actual observation that clergymen are human."

"Some clergymen," remarked one of his friends.

"A timely qualification, my worthy *frère*. The priesthood are indeed divisible into three classes; they are either men, women, or fiends. Now my fiendish brother would excommunicate me and send me—you all know where—for concocting this wonderful bowl of liquid headache; and my womanish brother would pray for me hysterically; but you, my manly brethren, will right manfully help me to drink it."

The punch was worthy of its maker, whose humorous eye twinkled as he tasted it.

"Will it do, Mr. Langton?" he asked.

"I never tasted punch before," said Stephen frankly. "It is delicious."

"Frederic," said the Rhymer, "see that the doors are shut, or my bass voice may wake some of my sleeping brethren. I am about to sing a song which I did into English from Béranger the other day. 'Tis called *The Keys of Paradise*."

He had a noble bass voice, and did justice to the rather heterodox lyric.

"Noble Saint Peter lost, of late,
The golden keys of the heavenly gate;
(Queerest story ever put in metre!)
Pretty Margaret passed one day,
And cunningly snatched the keys away.
'I say, Margot!
'Twon't do, you know:
Give me my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter.

"Margaret lost not a moment's time,
But opened the gates of the heavenly clime—
(Queerest story ever put in metre!)
And devotees strict and sinners accurst
All rushed in with a furious burst.
'I say, Margot!
'Twon't do, you know:
Give me my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter.

"Singing together passed merrily through
A Protestant, a Turk, a Jew—
(Queerest story ever put in metre!)
Then came a Pope, the Popedom's pride,
Who, but for Maggie, would have stayed outside.
'I say, Margot!
'Twon't do, you know:
Give me my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter.

"Jesuits, too, whom we all detest,
Came for a seat among the blest,
(Queerest story ever put in metre!)
And without struggles or shoves or wrenches,
Sat with the seraphs on the foremost benches.
'I say, Margot!
'Twon't do, you know:
Give me my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter.

"Vainly did a fool exclaim,
That such facility was downright blame,
(Queerest story ever put in metre!)
For Satan escaped from his hot restraint,
And the beauty made him a horned saint.
'I say, Margot!
'Twon't do, you know:
Give me my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter.

"The devil being safe, 'twas then thought well
By royal edict to extinguish hell,
(Queerest story ever put in metre!)
Such kindness quickly converted most,
So that soon there was nobody left to roast.
'I say, Margot!
'Twon't do, you know:
Give me my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter.

"Heaven was getting so extremely gay,
That Peter himself wished to pass that way;
(Queerest story ever put in metre!)
But he'd sent too many to a warmer place,
So Maggy shut the door in his apostolic face.
'I say, Margot!
That's too bad, you know:
My keys! my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter."

"Much too bad," chorussed his companions.

"Oh, no doubt Maggy relented in time," said one of them, "after she had frightened the apostolic suitor."

"I don't know," said Stephen. "Young ladies are cruel creatures."

"Ho, ho!" exclaimed the Rhymer, "that's where you are, is it? A victim of feminine heartlessness.

"Perfida, sed quamvis perfida, cara tamen."

Why not tell us your story? You need not name names, as the Speaker would say. It will do you good."

"I don't suppose," said Stephen, "it will do me any harm. The simple truth is that I was engaged to marry a young lady, with the approval of her father; that, on her father's death, her guardians declined to allow me to see her; and that my most intimate friend, having access to her, persuaded her to elope with him."

"You are laudably laconic," said the Rhymer. "I hope the event has not turned you into a Byronic misanthrope. How old was the lady?"

"Nearly seventeen."

"Ah! a child. You can't blame her. She is too young to know her own mind. And the man you call your friend was not your friend. Friends are few, Mr. Langton. Be your own friend. Take your own part. That is the best advice I can give you. And now, if it is not too late, and nobody objects, and the punch is not exhausted, I'll tell you a short story."

The offer was received with enthusiasm.

"A young man whom I knew fell in love. He was the son of a perpetual curate—which happily does not mean a man doomed to perpetual curacy. The lady whom he loved was the only child of the lord of the manor, a many-acred baronet. She was beautiful beyond the imagination of man, of course. *Cela va sans dire.* When I last saw her she was a very puffy old personage.

"The hero of my story, whom I will call Smith, to save trouble, was much given to dreaming. He dreamt one night that a Greek book in his father's library lay open before him, and that on one of the pages a single line stood out in red letters, and it was revealed to him that if he uttered that line thrice his lady-love would come to him, wherever he was. But he could not, when he awoke, recollect the line; and as he knew exactly as much Greek as Byron's Donna Inez, it was not quite clear to him how to look for it. He felt sure, however, that if he saw the line he should recognise it.

"Now, though Smith was a dolt, Smith's father was very much the reverse, and was the possessor of a very fair library, wherein there was much Greek. Smith astounded his father by suddenly taking to the study of Greek. It was in a curious fashion, though. He took the first Greek volume on a given shelf, seated himself (he was a lazy rascal) in an easy chair, and looked carefully through it for a certain line. Smith's father was amazed to see his son read Greek so rapidly. Being a very Low Churchman, and a firm believer in all manner of miracles, he began to think his son had the gift of tongues. Smith rattled away through Æschylus, Sophocles, Homer, Herodotus, Pindar, and Plato, and a good many other fellows in the same line of business, at a pace unparalleled.

"But, as the Irish proverb hath it—

'Patience and perseverance
Found a wife for his Reverence;'

which, as priests of the Latin schism can't by any possibility have wives, was rather a hard matter. And so at last the mighty line flashed upon Smith. This was it:—

ποῦ ποῦ 'στι, ποῦ ποῦ ποῦ 'στι, ποῦ ποῦ ποῦ 'στι, ποῦ.

I'm not at all surprised at Smith's recognising it.

"Having recognised it, he toiled hard to learn it by heart. This did not take him above an hour and a half. He carried away this famous line in his brain, and when he went to bed that night he uttered the spell.

"At the first utterance of the magical verse there was a sound as if water were being poured into a vessel.

"At the second utterance of the magical verse there was a strong smell of brown Windsor soap.

"At the third utterance of the magical verse the walls of the chamber opened, and the lady entered, sitting in her night-dress, with her feet in hot water."

Here the Rhymer made an obstinate pause.

"Did she speak?" asked Stephen. "What happened?"

"I know nothing more. The canon says, *Solus cum solâ non præsumitur orare.* The young man is now a bishop, and pretty often in hot water himself."

Soon after this queer tale had been told, they went to bed, the Rhymer telling Stephen that he should be glad to meet him at breakfast. The other two gentlemen were off by an early coach to distant country parsonages.

Stephen awoke the next morning with the great-grandfather of headaches. He was young, you know, and unaccustomed to punch. Much icy water scarcely removed the leaden oppression on his brow, and he felt thankful that the breakfast hour was late. His new acquaintance had appointed eleven.

And at eleven they met. Everybody else in that sedate hostelry had breakfasted long before. With the sagacity which experience confers, the Rhymer ordered Stephen to begin with the soda and brandy, and then recommended him some anchovies done on toast. To his amazement, our young friend found he could eat. As to his companion, his appetite was Homeric.

And, having elicited from Stephen his position in the world, and his utterly indefinite designs, he proceeded to give him some excellent advice. As it turned out entirely useless, it is scarcely worth while to record it here. I am sure my readers would not take any of it.

They were long over their breakfast. The Rhymer, as I must continue to call him, for Stephen was unable to extract his name

from Frederic or anybody else in the establishment of *the Faithfull*, had nothing to do all the morning, and so, as he said, could indulge his laziness. So the ripe and thoughtful clergyman, whose humour years had not destroyed, and the mere boy, dreamy and poetic, full of wonder as to what years might give him, gossipped loiteringly together over their coffee.

Amid their gossip entered a singularly handsome young man, of the middle height, dressed in the utmost fashion. The affable Frederic approached him, somewhat awed by an aristocratic apparition of an order that coffee-room seldom saw.

"Waiter," he said, "is Mr. Langton staying here?"

"This is Mr. Langton, sir," said Frederic.

Stephen came forward.

"Ah, Mr. Langton," said the stranger, "you have forgotten me, no doubt. You were a boy when we met. My name is Branscombe—Raphael Branscombe. I heard you were in town from our friend Drax, and I thought you might be puzzled sometimes how to spend your evenings, so I thought I'd ask you to look in upon us when you want amusement. Claudia and I are at No. — Clarges Street. Claudia told me to say she would always be glad to see you."

Which was quite true. When a note from Mr. Drax informed Raphael, among other things, that Stephen was in town, he at once said—

"I shall look up that boy, Claudia!"

"What for?" asked the Panther, well aware that her brother seldom did anything without a reason.

"Well, apart from the fact that he would be an exceedingly good match for a certain young lady whom it is my duty to get married" (Claudia winced), "there is never any harm in the acquaintance of verdant boys with money."

"Don't victimise him, Raphael," pleaded the Panther.

"You have still a *tendresse* for him, have you? Well, why should all old Page's money go out of the family? Send him a message, child."

"You may tell him I shall always be glad to see him."

"Very well. Don't be surprised if I bring him home to dinner."

Raphael drove his mail-phaeton eastward—specially to call on Stephen. And, after the speech already narrated, he sat down, and called for a pint of claret, and the three entered into desultory converse. Raphael perceived that the Rhymer, whoever he might be, belonged to a higher order of mind than he commonly encountered; while the Rhymer studied Raphael with much interest, as a variety of the human animal entirely new to him. I wish he had had to describe him rather than I.

"Let me give you a drive, Mr. Langton," said Raphael. "London is famous as possessing the most beautiful suburbs of any city in the world. I've a pair of horses outside that want

exercise, and I've nothing in the world to do this morning, so you'll be doing me a service by accepting."

Stephen accepted. Raphael took him through Brompton and Fulham, across Putney Bridge, that villainous old structure, up the hill to the heath, and then away to the right through Richmond Park, across Richmond Bridge, and along the banks of the Thames, through Twickenham and Teddington and Hampton Wick to Hampton Court. He put his horses up at the Toy, and showed Stephen the Palace, and then they lounged into the Tennis Court.

"Do you play?" said Raphael.

"No."

"Ah! that's unlucky; 'twould have given you an appetite for a bit of luncheon. Here, marker, come and play."

Having beaten the marker with infinite ease—for, as I have said, Raphael was master of all games—he proposed that they should lunch. So they returned to the Toy and refreshed themselves, Stephen all the while wondering at his companion's cool and skilful style of doing everything.

Returning, Raphael drove northward through Weston, getting into the Uxbridge Road somewhere near Hanwell, and making his way through Ealing and Acton to homewards. It was a long and pleasant drive; there was life on the great roads in those days before steam; and it was past five o'clock when Raphael pulled up in Clarges Street.

"We dine at six," he said to Stephen. "Come in. There will be no one but my sister, who'll forgive your dress. Come to my dressing-room and wash your hands."

Stephen presently found himself in the drawing-room alone, his companion having excused himself to look after the wine.

"I'm always my own butler," he said in his airy fashion.

So Stephen lay back in a soft chair of ruddy velvet, and looked at the hot caverns of fire amid the coals in the grate, and dreamt. His heart was palpitating with a dread of Claudia, whose last words had told him that she hated him—and with a longing to subjugate and tame her, a wild and beautiful and queenly creature, with all the subtlety of womanhood, and all the strength of manhood. His quick brain went off in its usual way, combining, plotting, imagining scenes, and with the vanity of inexperience, fancying his victory won. He was a new Alnaschar. As he mentally revelled in a fine dramatic situation, in which the Panther was sobbing at his feet, the silence was disturbed by a rustle of silk, and a voice which he had never forgotten—a voice that he had heard imperious and imperial, that he had heard broken and beseeching, that he had heard whispering passionately in his ear the strong temptation of an offered love—said calmly—

"How do you do, Mr. Langton?"

And they were seated opposite each other and talked. And

he looked in vain into those great black eyes for either the soft light of love or the angry glare of rage. And he thought to himself, "Ah, me, what do I here? This woman is wise. I am a child, I am a fool, I am lost."

Yes, Stephen Langton was wise enough to think thus.

In the calmest and most commonplace way did Claudia Branscombe talk to Stephen concerning the news of Idlechester and Kingsleat. Lightly did she refer to Anne's elopement, quoting the ancient proverb anent marrying in haste and repenting at leisure, and saying—

"Poor child! A mere baby, and now Mrs. Morfill. I hope the young man will be kind to her; but his conduct shows that he is selfish, and selfish men have seldom much kindness."

"Only a brute could be unkind to her," said Stephen.

"What, are you in love with her still? You were very fortunate to lose her. Your own character—excuse my frankness—has not yet much stability, and if you had married her it would have been terrible for both. You would have been like—well, comparisons are odious," she said, laughing. "But I think it was well for you."

"Possibly," said Stephen. "One is not always perfectly satisfied with what everybody else professes to think the best thing that could happen. I had a certain faith and loyalty which Mrs. Morfill's conduct has shattered. I have now to recommence the world on a new principle."

"Don't you think," asked Claudia, "that you may be hasty in condemning the whole of our sex because one little girl has been unfaithful?"

"Ah, I wish I could tell. Nothing except experience will enable me to correct an error of that kind. Can you wonder that I am in a state of utter uncertainty?"

"I don't wonder, but I think you would be wise not to come to hasty conclusions. However, it is an unimportant matter to every one but yourself."

Raphael Branscombe presently joined them, and dinner was announced. A good dinner, we may be sure, at an establishment of which Raphael was the head. From the oysters and anchovy salad to the ice-pudding—from the dry Sillery to the Château Yquem—everything was perfect. Stephen, whose capacity for enjoyment was enviably complete, dined like an emperor.

By and by the Panther retired, and Raphael and Stephen were left alone. Their conversation was curious. Neither understood the other. Raphael regarded Stephen as a mere greenhorn, a foolish, inexperienced boy, who could be enticed into any kind of extravagance or absurdity; whereas Stephen had in him just so much of the poetic faculty as enabled him to detect what was false and forged, to shrink from what was ridiculous. Stephen thought Raphael a marvellous specimen of the human race, for beauty, for skill, for general cleverness—nor ever suspected in

him that astucity which lay at the base of his other qualities. The game, therefore, which these two were playing, unconsciously, so far as one of these was concerned, was singular. Each imagined he knew the other's cards and didn't.

"Do you intend to remain long in London?" asked Raphael in the course of conversation.

"I really have no decided intention," said Stephen. "It seems to me that for a man without any definite object in life, London is about the best place to live."

"Well, I don't see why you should have no object in life," returned Raphael; "but that, of course, is your affair, only if you think of remaining in town, you should belong to a club, and I'll put your name down at the Chandos, if you like."

"I shall be very glad," said Stephen.

"And what are you going to do this evening?"

"This evening!" replied Stephen in some amazement, looking at his watch. "Why, it is ten o'clock now. I thought of going back to the Chapter Coffee-house in about an hour."

"Just the time to begin the evening," said Raphael. "However, nobody can wonder at your inexperience, seeing that you are fresh from an old-world place like Idlechester. But if you don't mind making a night of it, you and I will turn out presently, after a cup of tea."

"I am at your service," said Stephen.

"And if you mean to remain in town, don't stay at that place in St. Paul's Churchyard. Let me find you rooms somewhere in this part of London."

Stephen assented, Raphael rang the bell, and sent for his valet. When Louis arrived, his master said—

"Find Mr. Langton rooms somewhere between this and St. James's Church. Let them be comfortable, but not extravagant. See that the cookery is good. And if you know a fellow who would do as Mr. Langton's valet, tell me."

"I know precisely the man," said Louis. "His name is Auguste Lancel. He is just seeking employment."

"Very well. Let me see him to-morrow. I can judge," he said to Stephen, "whether he is fit for anything; and if he is, you can see him."

"I am sorry to give you so much trouble."

"You don't give me any. It amuses me. I am delighted to be able to help anybody so thoroughly ignorant of the world as you are."

"That's no great compliment," said Stephen.

"Well, I'd willingly change places with you. You're about ten years younger than I am; you're good-looking and clever, and tolerably well off; you've got the world before you, and are quite ignorant of both the bright and the dark side of it. You're an uncommonly lucky fellow. I should like to be in your position."

"Meanwhile," said Stephen, "I shall be laughed at for my ignorance."

"Why not? Those who laugh at you will be people who overestimate the value of their own knowledge. I think I know the world as well as most men, and I have long been of opinion that it is not worth knowing. Honestly," said Raphael, "I envy you."

They passed to the drawing-room, where the Panther gave them coffee; gave them also music and song. Have we not heretofore heard the passionate melody throb through that white throat of hers? I don't quite know how she felt that evening. For this supercilious boy her kirtle had fallen in vain; he had refused her, he had pitied her. *Now*, the love which caused him to refuse and pity her was wholly frustrate. *Now*, he might think otherwise. *Now*, also, the plot to which, for her father's sake, she had pledged herself, was frustrate. True, if she married this boy, there would be money enough to live at ease; and he would be a docile husband. But as I am analysing a lady's thoughts, I must here remark that there arose to disturb her calculations a vision of a handsome baronet, superbly apparelled, magnificent in moustache.

Strange to say, Sir Arthur Willesden had made an impression on Claudia. I really had hoped that my Panther was above womanish weaknesses—not so. You see, she wanted to be tamed, to be tyrannised over, to be lashed into obedience. The man to do this came not: she, with wistful eyes desiring a master, imagined strength of will and stern resolve in this Sir Arthur Willesden, simply because he was big and muscular, and looked as if he could knock down an ox. 'Tis the way with womankind; if they cannot find the right man they endow some utterly wrong man with the requisite characteristics.

Well, this night Claudia was affable to Stephen, and sang and played for him, and chatted pleasantly with him, and expressed a hope that he would not let Raphael lead him into mischief. Raphael's practical reply was the production of some remarkably fine cavendish.

"By mischief, my sister means smoke," said Raphael; "but she doesn't object to it."

She did not, as we know.

"Is that wonderful old grandfather of yours still flourishing?" asked Raphael. "I remember his bringing you to see us one morning at Kingsleat, heaven knows how many years ago. Claudia petted you, and I scolded her afterwards for falling in love with you."

The Panther looked fierce.

"My grandfather is in very good condition," said Stephen, "though he is growing old like the rest of us. I assure you, Mr. Branscombe, I have often great difficulty in assuring myself that I am the unfortunate little schoolboy whom your sister

petted. Indeed, I am sometimes doubtful as to the reality of even later events."

"He's not such a fool as he looks," thought the Seraph.

"He has not forgotten," thought the Panther.

No: he was not a fool, this Stephen Langton; nor had he forgotten. He could not comprehend Raphael Branscombe's friendly interest in him and his affairs; but he knew there must be some reason for it, and he waited for time to reveal that reason. And he had not forgotten even the flavour of the peach which the beautiful Claudia had given him so many years ago—or the touch of her lips when he lay in bed at Kingsleat, and she and the Bishop's wife curvetted like a couple of young fillies, unrestrained by his childish presence—still less that moment when she had thrown herself into his arms, and he had rejected her. Nothing did he forget; but he could not understand on what terms they were to meet in future. Were they enemies or friends, or coldly neutral?

He did not know. Did she?

Stephen made a night of it. It was midnight when Raphael and he left the Panther to her own devices. They went away to the Chandos Club, where Raphael gave Stephen his first lesson in billiards, and introduced him to a very select circle of pleasant fellows, given to bad habits. It was exactly six when he reached the Chapter Coffee-house, and went to bed. It was two in the afternoon when he came down to breakfast the next day.

Raphael did not resign his office as guardian and guide. In a very few days Stephen found himself comfortably established in rooms in Jermyn Street, with Auguste Lancel in attendance; and he very much enjoyed his new style of life. He seemed to take to it naturally. Dressed by the most fashionable tailors, Stephen Langton, if he had suddenly appeared in the High Street of Idlechester, would scarcely have been recognised by Jack Winslow or his aunt Harriet. The Panther was quite amazed at his development.

And not the Panther only. Humphrey Morfill, having arranged all matters of business satisfactorily, came from Wetheral to London with full intent to conquer the world. He had married Anne Page, as he intended; why should he not carry out his other intentions? True, he hadn't as much money with her as he expected; and for this he often, with a want of logic of which a Cambridge man should have been ashamed, blamed his unoffending little wife. But a couple of thousand a year was a good start, and Humphrey was resolved not to lose a single chance. His ambition was almost a mania. He came to town, and took a house in Mesopotamia, which Lady Morley christened Cubitopolis. He entered himself at the Middle Temple, and took to the study of law with avidity. He left his wife a good deal alone, of necessity. When Stephen knew of their being in

town he called at once, and his unfaithful sweetheart was astounded to see him so complete a man of fashion. The Panther also called, under Raphael's orders, and found Humphrey, who chanced to be at home, excessively glad to find anybody who would occasionally entertain his wife in his absence; and the result was that, all previous occurrences apparently forgotten, Mr. and Mrs. Morfill, and Mr. and Miss Branscombe, and Mr. Langton, associated very freely and pleasantly. Raphael, however, did not call on the Morfills for some time after their arrival in London. When he did, and it was over, as Claudia and he were walking homeward, the Seraph said—

"What a devilish pretty little thing she is? I wish I had seen her in time."

Sweet Anne Morfill was at the same moment thinking that she had never seen so fascinating a man as Mr. Raphael Branscombe, but she did not mention this idea to her husband.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. AND MRS. MORFILL.

HUMPHREY MORFILL and his wife, in Mesopotamia, were not perhaps as happy as they ought to have been. And the reason was tolerably clear. Humphrey, to begin with, had never loved the pretty little infantile creature whom he had married. Indeed, it may fairly be stated that he had never loved any one except himself. His sole object had been to obtain a wife with money, and in this he had succeeded. Sweet Anne Page, on the other hand, had lived all her life in a delicious dream of love; she was a child still, and did not know what love meant; but she assuredly expected a kind of chivalrous deference which Humphrey Morfill did not give her. In truth, he gave her something very different. He was her tyrant. He had already regretted the position in which he had placed himself. More than once had he considered it an inexcusable blunder to have sacrificed that fine intellect of his for a couple of thousand a year. The thing was done, but he could not help behaving to his bride as if he thought she ought to be ashamed of herself. Of course the poor child, who at any rate fancied she loved him, could not comprehend his horrible baseness.

Still he managed to make her extremely unhappy. He treated her in a very childish fashion. The method of the marriage had made him master of the money, and he took the earliest possible opportunity of showing her that it was so. He soon taught her to consider herself dependent on him. Gladly would she

have been dependent on any creature who showed her the love for which she craved eternally; but this Humphrey would show her none. Indeed, he had none to show.

I do not blame this man. There are beings—I suppose I must say *human* beings—who do not know the meaning of *love*—the utmost to which they can rise is *affection*. The passionate love wherewith a man (who *is* a man) can love a wife, or a sister, or a son, or a daughter, is to them unintelligible. So much the better for them, perhaps; who knows? Never is there great love without great grief. I fancy Humphrey Morfill belonged to this class—to this pitiable or enviable class, I know not which. At any rate, he was a man capable of being extremely affectionate, and quite incapable of loving. Ah me, that terrible incapacity! You who have loved, and have through your love been compelled to endure grief unutterable, torture such as would have maddened Prometheus—

> "The vulture at his vitals, and the links
> Of the lame Lemnian festering in his flesh"—

take my word for it that this is infinitely better than not to have tasted

> "The cruel madness of love,
> The honey of poison flowers, and all the measureless ill."

And you *affectionate* men and women—if indeed there be any affectionate women—God help ye all! Why were ye not cows? ruminating animals? chewers of the cud?

Little Anne would, I think, have been happy enough with even an *affectionate* husband, if only her husband had not been tyrannical. But Humphrey was a tyrant of the coolest order. He wore no glove over the steel gauntlet. He was her master, and took every opportunity of letting her know it. So Anne was wretched enough; and you cannot be surprised if she was extremely glad to see anybody who was not her husband, especially as her husband spent long matutine hours at the Temple, with an eye to the Solicitor-Generalship—*et cetera*.

So she welcomed Claudia, whom in her babyhood she had feared. She had learned that a petticoated tyrant with a riding-whip is more endurable than the tyrannic husband whose frown is torture. As to the Panther, it must be confessed that her first visit to the Mesopotamian terrace was not satisfactory. She felt that she had been rather severe to her little friend. She thought the best way of dealing with the matter was to laugh it off altogether. She managed pretty well, but there was a little preliminary shyness. It is not everybody who has the coolness of the Eton boy who happened to dine with Keate on a long-standing invitation on the very day when that best of head masters had had to administer a flogging.

"I have not seen you for a long time," said the Doctor.

"Not this side of me, sir," responded his promising alumnus.

But Anne, who had quite forgiven the Panther her trifling tyrannies, was delighted to find any one who would comfort her. Poor child! she wanted comfort. Naturally dull, the dreadful fact that Humphrey had married her merely as a matter of convenience had not yet occurred to her. Naturally obedient, she had not thought of rebelling against the routine to which he had condemned her. And here, I regret to say, Claudia was her accomplice—nay, her prompter—in naughtiness. Claudia told her that, as the actual owner of the property on which her penniless husband lived, she ought to have plenty of enjoyment. Thereby Claudia gave a considerable amount of trouble to Mr. Humphrey Morfill, who spent a great deal of his time in proving to his wife that it was necessary to avoid extravagance. A little pleasure, pleasantly given, would have satisfied her. She was not exorbitant in her demands. If he had loved her, he could have supplied what she needed with infinite ease. But love teaches lessons not to be learnt elsewhere.

Stephen was too proud not to visit her. Between them there was no explanation. Indeed, Stephen would not have listened to a word. He had made up his mind that love was a swindle, a sell. He had come to consider religion cant, and morality a myth. It is a mental and moral disease this, to which young men of any brain are subject, and which they take with special readiness, if they happen to encounter a disappointment. They argue from the particular to the universal in delicious defiance of Aldrich. My friend Stephen, having been jilted by a plump child of the most infantile character, came to the terribly tragical conclusion that *all women were false.* He had never known a woman. But if ever he had been right in arguing from sweet Anne Page to every creature that wears petticoats, would that have justified him in denying the inspiration of the New Testament? I am inclined to think not.

Raphael Branscombe saw a good deal of Mrs. Morfill. As Humphrey spent his mornings at the Temple, Anne, weary of her loneliness, took refuge with her friend the Panther. The Seraph, discovering this, and having a constitutional tendency to amuse himself, was wont to lounge into his sister's apartments, and talk to Anne. Claudia, we know, had plenty of morning visitors, so Raphael had ample time to flirt with this innocent child. And he did it. And it looked very much as if she liked it. One evening, as he was smoking alone in his sanctum, Claudia made her way thither. It showed the Panther's daring. Raphael had strictly prohibited all invasion there. But Claudia, at about midnight, majestic in a rustling purple silk, entered the room in which the Seraph sat. It *almost* surprised him; I cannot say more.

But he merely removed from his lips the amber mouthpiece of a hookah from which he had been drawing cool draughts of fragrant smoke, and said—

"Well?"

The Panther was not easily shut up. She settled herself tidily and gracefully in an easy chair, and said very deliberately—

"I want to speak to you, Raphael!"

"Talk away, child," he replied.

"What is there between you and Anne Page?" she asked peremptorily.

"A husband, my dear," he said. "At least, if by Anne Page you mean your nice little friend, Mrs. Morfill."

"Raphael," she said with eager earnestness, "I implore you to leave them alone. Poor little Anne! She has married a man who does not love her, and she has not learnt the meaning of love herself. Don't be cruel to them, Raphael. I know how dangerous you are. They have done you no harm."

The Seraph rose from his seat, dropping the mouthpiece of his hookah, and stood with his back to the fire. He seemed to deliberate for a minute or two. Then he spoke.

"Claudia, I thought better of you. *They have done me no harm!* They have simply deprived me of a pleasant and ample income which I could have commanded. If I had seen Anne Page ten minutes before she ran away with this young fellow, do you think she would have gone? She's a mere child; a man need not be proud of winning her; she would have said yes to any man."

"Then why be vexed about it?" said the Panther. "She is not fit to be *your* wife. And there are plenty of girls with twice the money who would be glad to marry you. Why not leave her alone?"

"Are you a Branscombe, Claudia?" asked Raphael. "What, do you think I care for the silly child and her two thousand a year? Not but what, pretty as she is, I might have married her had I seen her in time—but I care no more about it than I care what I shall have for dinner to-morrow."

"Then," said Claudia, after a pause, "why do you waste so much time upon her? Why do you make her like you?"

Raphael gave utterance to a sardonic laugh, but made no reply.

"Tell me," said the Panther.

"Tell you what, child?"

"Why you flirt with that poor little Anne Morfill till she wishes her husband was hanged."

"My dear Claudia, I shall continue to think you *are* a Branscombe, even against the strong evidence to the contrary you have just given. But you are a strange girl, and I think you had better go to bed."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that you are losing that piquant perspicacity which used to distinguish you. Here you are asking me why I flirt with your little bride? Have you ever asked a cat why he chases mice; or, if that simile is not poetic enough for your taste, can you tell me why a falcon kills smaller birds? If you desire to remonstrate, Claudia, by all means lecture your frivolous flippant little friend. Cry *Ware hawk.* Give her the very best advice, moral, religious, social. I hope it will do her good."

"I can't think what you see in her," said the Panther meditatingly.

"Dear me, can't you? Why, a plump morsel of flesh and blood and loveliness—that's all; and that's enough to tempt any man to delicious morsiunculæ. She's not a marvel of the jungle, like you—a terror to mild men—a creature to be tamed with a wrist of steel and a lash of wire. No; she's all love and melting sweetness, like a candied conserve of the East."

"Well, I shall warn her," said Claudia.

"Do, and discharge your conscience. If you warn her against me, and make her afraid of me, you will increase my amusement, and I doubt whether you will decrease her danger. That is an affair entirely for your consideration. Meanwhile, my dear Claudia, permit me to say that *I warn you.*"

"Oh, you're not going to frighten me," said the Panther, frightened all the while.

"You mistake me. I do not wish to warn you against advising your friend. I wish you in that to do exactly what you deem wisest. But I warn you against too intimate a flirtation with that blockhead Willesden."

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed indignantly.

"Be calm—that's a good girl. I have not the least fear that you will do anything silly. The men of our family have always been *sans peur*, and the women *sans reproche*—an excellent way of dividing the old motto. But Willesden can't marry, you know; and if you flirt too much with him there may be talk; and if any talk comes to my ears, you know I *must* shoot him, which would be devilish inconvenient for all parties. So be prudent; I don't see what there is to admire in such a large awkward mass of jewellery and Eau-de-Cologne—but that's your affair."

"Well, good night, Raphael," said Claudia; "I shall warn her."

And she did. She got her into her bedroom at her next visit, and told her it was very wrong to flirt so much with Raphael. Anne became mutinous.

"Flirt!" she said. "What do you mean by flirting? I merely talk to Mr. Branscombe, and not half as much as you do to Sir Arthur Willesden. You seem to forget that I am a married woman now."

"Mr. Morfill wouldn't like it," said the Panther, amused at her little friend's assumption of dignity.

"Then Mr. Morfill should not leave me alone all day, without any amusement, and come home to his dinner as stupid and cross as he can be. He is living on my money, and he ought to know better."

The meekest little women in the world get a spirit in them when conscious of possessing money.

"I mean to do just as I like, Claudia," she continued. "Mr. Branscombe is very pleasant to talk to, and he won't eat me, I suppose, though he is your brother; and I really think you had better attend to your own affairs."

Claudia was both amused and amazed at her friend's rebellious spirit. Being a wife, the young lady considered herself in a rank above all unmarried women: she thought it impertinent of Claudia to venture to lecture her. Marriage had conferred a funny kind of dignity upon her; so the Panther's lecture had no effect, save perhaps to increase Anne's interest in her intercourse with Raphael, by reason of its appearing perilous.

As to Raphael, when Claudia left him on the evening of her lecture, he fell to soliloquy.

"I rather like the little girl," he said to himself. "She's a dainty pet. Æmilia is a fine woman, no doubt; and Fiordilisa is a girl out of Shakespeare, as poetic as she is beautiful; and, by Jove! I wish I was back with her in Isola Rossa. But this little Morfill is such a lump of sweetness; she'd melt in a fellow's mouth like a ripe greengage; and then that villain Morfill stole her—stole her from *me*, too, the unprincipled reprobate. 'Twould be a fine thing to revenge myself upon him by carrying off his wife."

So Claudia's remonstrance rather increased her brother's tendency to flirt with Mrs. Morfill. And, a few days later, he made a movement in advance. The scene was Claudia's drawing-room; the Panther was singing divinely for Sir Arthur's delectation; Raphael was talking in low tones to Anne.

"How delightfully your sister sings!" she had said.

"Not half so delightfully as you talk. I could listen to your pretty prattle for ever."

"You speak as if I was a child," she said.

"So you are, and a very charming child, too. Why, you are not ashamed of being young, surely?"

"If I am old enough to be married, I ought not to be treated like a child," she replied with petty fretfulness.

"I never said you *were* old enough to be married. But never mind: I'll treat you with the greatest respect in future—just as if you were fifty."

"Oh no! Don't do that."

"I shall see you to-morrow morning, I suppose. Claudia is going to be out all day. By the way, can one ever find Mr. Morfill at home?"

"Very seldom; he generally goes to the Temple the moment breakfast is over."

"And you are all alone? Well, I think I shall call to-morrow morning, and see if I can find him."

"I don't think it will be any use," said Anne, "unless I tell him to wait at home for you."

"Don't on any account interfere with his business for me."

And she did not. By some curious caprice, Humphrey lounged longer over his breakfast than usual that next morning. He found something in the newspaper to interest him. Anne thought he was never going. But he went at last, after giving orders about the dinner two or three times over. He liked a good dinner after his work—not what Raphael would have called a good dinner, but something full flavoured and substantial. None of your delicate *entrées* and curious wines for Mr. Morfill: leg of mutton, sirloin, steak, Reid's stout, Carbonell's fruitiest port—these were his favourite eatables and drinkables. He was not refined. He liked onions.

In the course of the morning Raphael appeared, regretted that Mr. Morfill was not at home, and sat down for a chat with Mrs. Morfill. She was looking very nice. There was a rosy flush, and childish freshness, about her; a deal of pink in her print dress, of coral and cream in her complexion, of loving innocence in her soft glance. Raphael thought her the prettiest specimen of babyish beauty he had ever seen.

"I should like to put you under a glass case, Mrs. Morfill," he said, "and keep you in my own room to look at."

"Make me a prisoner, as Humphrey does. I'm sure I wish he was anything but a lawyer; he slaves at it night and day, and I get no pleasure at all."

"What would you like? You ought to be playing *Les Graces* with a dozen other little girls upon a green lawn under shady trees."

"That's the way with you all," she said, with a provoking pout. "You talk to me as if I was a baby. Humphrey always does. And Claudia used to at Kingsleat; but I'm better off than she is; I *am* married, at least, and I don't think she ever will be."

"Don't you sometimes wish yourself unmarried?" said the Seraph, laughing.

"Indeed I do, every day of my life. What induced me to marry Humphrey I can't think. I should have been better off with Stephen."

"You should have waited for me."

"Oh, you're too old. And you think me a mere baby, I know."

"I think you the most beautiful creature I ever saw in my life," he said seriously. "And as I have said before, your youth is only too valuable a possession. We all get old fast enough. But you will always be young, I believe."

"You are laughing at me, Mr. Branscombe. You think I am not fit to be anybody's wife—only fit for a hoop or a skipping-rope."

"I wish you were my wife," he said. "I wish I had seen you in time."

"You vain being! So you really have conceit enough to fancy that I should have liked you better than Humphrey?"

She sprung from her seat, and danced round the room, laughing and clapping her hands.

"I am sure you would," he said. "More than that, I am sure you like me better now."

"Go away! go away! You are getting naughty. I shall ring the bell and order 'Mr. Branscombe's carriage.'"

"Don't you think you could be serious for a minute?" he said.

"No, not half a minute—not a second."

She had taken a long scarf, and was vainly trying to use it as a skipping-rope.

"Now, do sit down, just for a moment. I want to talk to you."

"But I don't in the least want to talk to you. I think I shall send out and buy a skipping-rope. I wonder what the dignified Mr. Morfill will say when he comes home to dinner if he finds me skipping in the Square."

Raphael rose from his seat, and tried to catch her arm; she ran away. He followed her. In a moment the chase had become exciting. The room was large, with much heavy furniture in it, in the regular Mesopotamian style; so there were plenty of opportunities for dodging. But the young lady's foot caught in a rug; she almost fell; and before she could recover herself Raphael had overtaken her.

She was an infant in his grasp. He coolly took her hands in one of his, and returned to his chair, and made her sit upon his knee.

"Now, young lady," he said, "you are my prisoner, and I can punish you for all the trouble you have given me."

"Oh! let me go, let me go, *please*. If Humphrey were to come! I'll scream, Mr. Branscombe, I will, positively."

"No, you won't. Come, I want a quiet talk, so sit still and let us have it."

"Let me go to my own seat, then."

"And run away again? Not exactly. No, you'll stay where you are. Come, let me put your hair back out of your eyes."

Her abundant hair had fallen over her brow amid their romp. He smoothed it gently back. Then he kissed her forehead, bringing up a blush to brighten all her beautiful young face.

"O Mr. Branscombe, you are very, very wicked! Let me go, do please let me go!"

"No, child. I want to ask you a question. Look at me

now, and answer truly, just as if you were saying your catechism."

"Well, what is it? I will answer if you'll promise to let me go."

"Very well, I promise. Do you think," he asked slowly and deliberately, "that if you had met me in time, you could have loved me?"

Anne's bright young beauty was reddened this time by a more vivid blush. Her long eyelashes drooped to veil her eyes. She did not speak.

"Answer!" he said in a passionate whisper.

She said not a word.

"Answer!" again he said, pressing her close to his breast—so closely that it was almost pain.

For sole reply she hid her face on his shoulder, and burst into a passion of tears.

"O my darling!" he exclaimed. "My poor little pet! My sweet love!" And all the while he rained kisses on her brow, her eyelids, her lips. And all the while she clung to him, quivering with ecstasy. She did not want to escape now. She lay in his arms like a bird in its nest.

"Kiss me!" he exclaimed, in the imperious tones of passion. "Kiss me! Speak to me! Call me by my name!"

She kissed him with clinging kisses, honey-sweet, fragrant as the jasmine's breath. And she looked at him with bright, loving fearless eyes, from which all tears had passed. And she said, in a low voice like the coo of the doves that haunted her father's Idlechester garden—

"I love you, Raphael."

CHAPTER XVI.

ISOLA CHESTER.

STEPHEN found that he was spending a good deal of money. It was expensive to be patronised by Raphael. Not that the Seraph deigned to borrow money of his friends, though quite willing to win money of them at any game they might choose to play. Debt with him was a fine art, and he had the rare capacity, however great might be his difficulties, of always providing himself with ready money. How he did this I don't pretend to say. He was, however, an extravagant man to associate with; he denied himself no luxury; he rode the best horses, drank the best wines, dressed in the best style. Stephen imitated him in all this. He was by no means satisfied with himself. But the shock of Anne Page's elopement had completely upset him; he

lived a false factitious life; he sought pleasure, careless what it cost.

One day they were talking of Mrs. Morfill. Stephen had called in Clarges Street; had entered for a brief visit Claudia's saloon, where he encountered his lost love, and then he and Raphael strolled into Piccadilly.

"That little girl who jilted you was looking particularly nice this morning, old fellow," said the Seraph.

She was; only a few days had passed since the scene of my last chapter, and in Raphael's presence she looked the very essence, the consummate flower, of beauty.

"Don't talk about her," said Stephen, "she is as heartless as she is pretty—a cruel coquette from the cradle."

"An abominable little flirt, certainly," replied the Seraph. "I pity Morfill."

"Why pity him? The fellow never cared about her. He got her money, which was all he wanted."

"Only half of it, my boy," laughed Raphael. "You got the rest, I'm glad to say, and are spending it like a prince. But come into Hatchett's, and have a glass of sherry. I've got an idea."

"You have no special affection for the young lady," said the Seraph, as they sat overlooking—

> "Piccadilly—shops, palaces, bustle, and breeze,
> The whirring of wheels and the murmur of trees."

"I despise her utterly," he replied with emphasis.

"And your friend, Morfill?"

"Him I both despise and hate. He has taught me to disbelieve in both love and friendship."

"What, my friendship!" said the Seraph. "That's too bad. Well, shall I teach you to believe in revenge?"

"It is useless. I can't horsewhip the fellow, or shoot him, because she preferred him to me."

"There is another mode of revenge," said the Seraph deliberately, leaning back in his chair, and sipping his sherry—"*through her.* Upon my word, I feel very like Mephistopheles talking to Faust. You're a philosophic fellow, Langton—do you think that though I look like a human being, I may be a demon without knowing it? They called my father Devil Branscombe, you know. I think there is something fiendish in my blood."

Stephen felt disposed to think likewise. We know his dreamy fantastic nature. He began to speculate whether this marvellous friend of his, so handsome, so daring, so coolly wicked, so regardless who suffered while he enjoyed himself, had not a touch of Asmodeus or Mephisto in him. And Claudia—was *she* a fiend? Was that scene of passion, which he could never forget, a diabolical temptation?

"You're off at a tangent," said Raphael. "Leave metaphysics till you smoke your midnight cigar, and tell me if you would like to see Morfill punished through her."

"I should; they both deserve it."

"Then it shall be done. *You* hate Morfill. *I* don't; he's not worth hating. But he foiled me, and I'll punish him for it. I intended to marry Anne, in which case you'd have hated and despised me, I guess."

"You were not my friend," he replied sadly.

"That's true. Well, if you agree to assist me, the thing shall be done. It's two o'clock; I shall want another accomplice; we'll call on Miss Chester—she'll be at breakfast."

"Who is Miss Chester?"

"You'll see, my friend. You have not yet learnt everything worth knowing in London. We have not far to walk. Mind, you are under my orders."

They left the hotel, and turned northwards till they came to a very quiet street indeed. It seemed to lead nowhere in particular. Even now the fierce traffic of London has not invaded it. It was tranquil and respectable. And at the dark green door of a very elegant little house Raphael knocked. The tidiest of bright-eyed maid-servants opened to them, and recognising Raphael with a smile, showed them at once into Miss Chester's breakfast-room.

She had "hair like sea-moss," this girl who lay loosely apparelled in the easiest of chairs—curious coloured hair, whose hue depended on the light in which you saw it. And her eyelashes were very dark and long, and her eyes were a strange glinting green, and her mouth, not very small, was exquisitely expressive. But her long white throat, and the curve from her shell-like ear, were unusual in their beauty, and her white hands had the same slender sinuous length and grace, and so, indeed, had every part of her form. And in her expression there was a strange blending of laziness with sauciness. Such was Isola Chester.

"Ah! Seraph! how do? Brought any good news? Friend of yours?"

"Yes; and a very good fellow. I want you to like him."

"That's easy. He looks only half baked. What's his name?"

"Langton, my pet. Now, don't chaff him, but let's have a talk. Why don't you eat your breakfast?"

"I can't. I'm seedy, and don't feel well by any means."

"I wish you'd talk English, Isola. I can't understand half you say, and as to Langton, you might as well talk Hebrew to him. And now, Miss Chester, perhaps you'll kindly give me your attention."

"All serene," she said.

"My friend Langton wants you to dine with him at Greenwich to-morrow. Will you go?"

"Like a bird," she answered; "but why doesn't he make it to-day? I've nothing to do."

"That's his affair—and mine. Perhaps he'll take you somewhere else to-day, if he's disengaged. But you mustn't talk slang."

"No, I won't," she said. "I'll talk as tall as you please. It's a beautiful day—send for horses, and let us ride somewhere."

"I don't mind that," said the Seraph. "Put on your habit. We'll go round to the stables, and see what we can get."

"I don't understand your plan," said Stephen, as they walked along.

"You will, to-morrow. We'll ride down to Richmond to-day, and give her some dinner at the Star, and to-morrow you must be at the Ship at Greenwich with her at five o'clock. I'll manage everything else."

"But why not explain your scheme?"

"Because I like mystery, and because I may have to vary it. It won't hurt you, I suppose, to eat your fish in the company of a pretty girl."

"She is singularly pretty," said Stephen. "I never saw anybody like her. But I wish she would talk intelligibly."

"I'll make her. She can talk as good English as you or I, or Mrs. Morfill."

Isola Chester looked charming on horseback. She had a graceful seat, and a delicate hand, and the prettiest figure in the world. It was a fine breezy spring day, and the ride to Richmond was delightful, nor less so the dinner. Miss Chester condescended to talk her purest English, and Stephen got on very well with her.

"You must see Isola home," said Raphael as they rode back to town. "I've an engagement this evening connected with our little plot. You will be punctual at Greenwich to-morrow?"

"To the minute," said Stephen gaily, for the iced champagne and Isola's effervescent chit-chat had aroused him from his customary gloom.

"I hope it will be as jolly a dinner as to-day's."

"No fear," replied the Seraph, and turned his horse's head in another direction. Stephen and his companion broke into a canter, and soon reached Miss Chester's residence.

"Come in and smoke a cigar," she said, as he lifted her from her horse. "It's early."

Having given him what she declared to be "a capital weed," and installed him in an easy-chair by the fire, she went off to get rid of her habit, and soon returned in the loosest of luxurious wrappers, of some soft and delicate material, made so as to reveal the beauties which it seemed to conceal. She looked at Stephen, who was gazing dreamily at the fire.

"What are you thinking about, Curls?" she asked. It was a custom of Miss Chester's to confer nicknames on her acquaintances, and Stephen's curly hair had already suggested one for him.

"I was thinking of Branscombe," he answered.

"Ah! now, if you can explain that mysterious Seraph to me, I'll thank you. What does this dinner at Greenwich mean? You're not spoons upon me, I know, so it can't be for my sake."

"What do you mean by spoons?" inquired Stephen, laughing.

"Oh, you verdant child! Why, you're not in love with me. You're always thinking about somebody else. Shall I tell you your fortune? I've got a pack of cards here."

And with the words she began to spread the cards upon the table, and to utter certain predictions. Suddenly she stopped.

"Oh! I can't tell you," she said. "There's murder and madness, and all sorts of dreadful things; and you won't marry the lady you love, nor yet the lady that loves you—you'll marry"——

"I shall never marry at all," interrupted Stephen. "Put away that nonsense. Tell me how long you have known Raphael Branscombe!"

"What! hasn't he told you? Well, I don't know why he should, either. Do you like him?"

"You ask me questions instead of answering mine," said Stephen. "Yes, I like him. We are great friends. But he puzzles me."

"I should rather think he did," said the pretty Isola, stretching her arms lazily above her head, so that the loose sleeves fell back to reveal their round whiteness. "He puzzles everybody. He's what the Scotch call not canny. I don't like being alone with him. I'm always expecting he'll disappear with a strong smell of brimstone."

"How long have you known him?" asked Stephen again.

"How old do you think I am?"

"Eighteen, perhaps."

"Sixteen, Mr. Langton; not a day more. I've got the certificate of my birth; it's almost the only thing my mother left me. And the Seraph has known me just ten years. He bought me when I was six."

"Bought you?"

"Yes, bought me. My mother was a tramp, and she fell down and died on the great Bath road, at the corner of Maidenhead Thicket. I've seen the place often since. There's a little inn close by. Mr. Branscombe was driving past, and he pulled up to ask what was the matter, for I was like a little mad thing. Well, they told him, and he found I had no relations but my mother's brother, and he bought me of him. And he told the people at the inn to wash me and get me some clothes, and to send me to a ladies' school that was close by. I was there eight years. Yes, it's just two years ago I ran away."

"Ran away!"

"Yes; the silliest thing I ever did. But there is wild blood in me. I'm a Bohemian, the Seraph says. I got terribly tired of the eternal stupid lessons, and church on Sundays. And a

young fellow in the neighbourhood—his name was Pringle—was spoons upon me. I didn't care twopence about him; but the fun of it was, he pretended to make love to Charlotte Newton, one of the governesses. You see, I had to be there all the holidays, and the Miss Mellishes, who kept the school, used to go away for a trip; so Miss Newton, who was their niece, had to take care of me. And we took long walks together, and young Pringle joined us, and he was cunning enough to make her think he admired her immensely, and every time he used to slip a little note into my hand, which, of course, I answered. Poor Miss Charlotte! she quite thought he'd marry her, and he was a gentleman farmer with a good deal of money. She was a large fat girl, and tremendously proud of her plump shoulders, and she used to go out to meet him in a very low dress, with just a scarf thrown over it, which she could drop to her waist, just to exhibit those shoulders of hers. Oh, I never shall forget poor Charlotte Newton's shoulders!"

And Miss Chester laughed melodiously.

"Well, at last, Fred Pringle proposed that we should amputate our mahogany"——

"What?" asked Stephen.

"Oh, I forgot your ignorance. Why, that we should cut—go away together. And he fixed a lonely part of the thicket, where he said a carriage should be waiting. He wrote this to me, you know, having told Charlotte that we were to meet him there next day. They had got on very fast, and used to kiss one another, and what I principally thought of was the spree of seeing Charlotte in a rage when she knew that he wanted me and not her. You see, I'm a remarkably nice party, Curls."

"Very nice," said Stephen—"to look at."

"Ha, ha! One to you, sir! Well, we walked to this place, and Fred met us, and a carriage and pair was waiting. And you may imagine Charlotte's fury when he told her that he and I were going in it, and that she might go back alone. She rushed at me, and called me all the names she could think of, and tore off my bonnet, and boxed my ears so that I felt it for a week after. But Fred got her away, and he and the driver tied her to a tree—it was a horse-chestnut, I remember—so that she shouldn't run away and give an alarm. Didn't she bite and scratch, that's all? She was as strong as a donkey, Fred said. I shall never forget it."

Again the fair Isola indulged in a tinkling burst of silvery laughter.

"So then you ran away with Mr. Pringle?" said Stephen.

"Yes, Curls, I did; stupid little fool that I was. But before I started, I just thought I'd pay Miss Charlotte out for boxing my poor little ears. So I pulled the scarf away from her great fat shoulders, and got a bunch of nettles, and made her tingle a

little, I promise you. What an object she must have looked when they found her!"

Again the wicked musical laughter.

"Rather cruel, don't you think?" said Stephen.

"I don't know. I didn't hurt her as much as she hurt me, I expect. Nettles only sting a little. Let's have some supper."

It was one o'clock—a very excellent supper hour. Isola rang the bell, and a charming little supper was served. But why chronicle suppers, even if one's hero enjoys them? And is Stephen Langton my hero? Well, if he is, I am not bound to follow him at all hours, or to ask whether he was not rather in a maze when he said good-bye after supper to his mysterious and very unconventional acquaintance.

Stephen drove Isola to Greenwich next day. He had had a brief interview with Raphael previously. The pretty creature looked desperately fascinating. It would be hard to chronicle the ever-changing colours of her eyes. And he took her to a pleasant room looking out upon the Thames, where a table was laid for four.

Raphael, when he left his companions on the previous evening, had gone straight to a certain Mesopotamian terrace, where dwelt a young wife whom he held in the hollow of his hand. For Humphrey Morfill had gone out of town for two days, and sweet Anne Page was alone.

The ambitious husband, eagerly pursuing aught that could yield him vantage, thought little of his pretty, lonely, desolate wife. Somebody else thought of her, though.

Yes, Raphael, reckless of consequences, came in upon her late that evening, and told her she was to dine at Greenwich with him next day.

She was just in the state to do anything with him or for him. She was subjugated, magnetised. And on the following day she met him by appointment at the Pantheon, and he took her down to the Ship on the box-seat of a drag, behind four horses. As they pelted along past China Hall, he said—

"You will meet an old friend at dinner, my pet."

"Who?" she asked, with some alarm.

"Oh, a very good old friend, you ungrammatical child. But I daresay you have forgotten him. You'll forget me in a week or two."

"You know I can never forget you for a moment, Raphael," she said reproachfully.

"Charming child! Well, you'll enjoy your dinner, and the society thereat. I wish that infernal fellow, Morfill, hadn't run away with you."

He gave the off-leader a vicious touch of the lash under the ear, with a wish that it was Humphrey he was hitting. His companion only sighed.

They reached the Ship. They were shown up into a room

There they found Stephen and Miss Chester waiting for them, and for dinner. It was a queer meeting.

"Mrs. Morfill—Miss Chester," said the Seraph, introducing the two ladies. "You'll like one another. Langton, you don't need any introduction here, I know."

"Not the slightest," he replied, and walking over to his old sweetheart, gave her a kiss before she knew what she was about.

"Come, Curls," exclaimed Isola, "that won't do."

"Oh, we're old friends," said Stephen. "Mrs. Morfill was engaged to be married to me, but liked somebody else better."

Poor little Anne could not understand all this; she kept as close to Raphael as possible. Very soon dinner was served, and a nescient observer might have said it was a perfect party of four. Raphael, the very ideal of a handsome fiend, sat opposite Stephen, the very ideal of a poetic young Englishman; while Anne Morfill, the simplest and most innocent-looking creature that ever got beyond the doors of a nursery, faced Isola Chester, the fascinating Bohemian, a wild young "tramp" dressed in lady-like perfection. Ay, it was a queer party.

Whitebait! Brown bread and butter! Hock in green glasses! Sweet little lasses! Who has not had this effervescent experience? But this present affair was rendered more piquant by circumstances. Here was sweet Anne Page dining between her first sweetheart and her last, utterly oblivious of her husband. Here was that slangy little Bohemian, Isola Chester, sitting opposite our heroine, and wondering what it was all about. Here was Stephen, dining, drinking, dreaming—but especially dreaming; and now and then pinching himself to ascertain whether he was awake or asleep. Here was the Seraph, amused as Mephistopheles, having, I verily believe, brought these people together just for the sake of seeing how they behaved. At any rate, if he thought to humiliate Anne he was mistaken. He forgot her infantile ignorance of the world; he forgot her love for him, which made everything right that happened in his presence. She was in Elysium; Isola was in Greenwich, dining at the Ship; Stephen was in Nephelococcygia, and I really don't know where the Seraph was.

"What do you think of this, Baby Morfill?"

She had found an apposite sobriquet for Anne at once.

"It is very nice," replied Anne. "But I don't care much about wine."

"Dear child, it prefers pap," said Isola. "I never saw such a pullet. Why, Seraph, what do you mean by bringing your baby here without her pyjamas."

"Don't be impudent, Isola," said Raphael.

"Don't *you*. I didn't come here to be sat upon. Wake up, old slow-coach, there; he's as grave as an earwig, and looks as dazed as if he saw a ghost."

"Quiet, my child," said the Seraph in his own style.

"It appears to me," said Stephen at this point, "that you are coolly monopolising the conversation. Now, look here, Branscombe, as Miss Chester is at present my property, I'll trouble you not to promise her anything. If you do, I shall make love to Anne—Baby, I mean. Baby, my pet, another glass of fiz."

"Fizzing fiz it certainly is," said Isola. "Seraph, I'll have a glass with you, to show that I forgive you."

"I say, Seraph," said Isola, "the short hours are getting long again. Let's go home."

This proposition was accepted. Raphael put his three companions inside the drag, leaving Stephen's trap to its fate. He dropt Stephen and Isola at the latter's residence. He took Mrs. Morfill to Mesopotamia, and then he drove home, as sober as a judge.

CHAPTER XVII.

STEPHEN'S DREAM.

"WELL, Branscombe," said Stephen the next time he met his friend, which was several days after the dinner at Greenwich, "I don't see what good—or rather what harm—you did the other night."

"And I'm sure I don't," said Raphael. "But I suppose you'll admit that it was a very amusing scene. Isola was in her element, and wasn't Baby Morfill mystified?"

"Oh, it was amusing enough. I enjoyed it. I should like a similar divertisement about once a week. But you know you talked grandly about revenge, and all that sort of thing. And when I saw you had brought Mrs. Morfill down with you, I thought you really meant something."

"My dear Langton, I thought exactly the same; but one cannot always control circumstances. I fancied I had a fine combination; at the last moment it eluded me. Still, as I said, we had a pleasant, odd sort of evening with those two girls; and we can at any moment now develop a row with Morfill."

"How so?"

"Simply enough. By some amazing chance, he does not seem to have heard of his wife's late hours in his absence. But nothing is easier than to make him aware of them; and then, as your little friend Isola would say, there'll be the devil to pay."

"And of course he would discover that you were the culprit?"

"Of course—unless, being a lawyer, and therefore an ass, he

managed to mistake you for me. But that wouldn't do; he might shoot you."

"So he might you," said Stephen.

"Might he?" returned the Seraph, laughing. "Egad, I'll give him leave when he likes."

"Well, what do you mean to do now?"

"I mean to wait a little. Are you in a hurry for your revenge, old fellow?"

"I should like to see him properly punished, I confess," said Stephen.

"Exactly. Well, I'm in no immediate hurry. You see Baby would be thrown on my hands, and I don't know that I want her. If she brought her two thousand a year with her it would be another affair. If I were in love with the child, or if, like you, I had been, it would alter the case. As it is, I'm getting on easily enough in London, and am in no haste to do something which might oblige me to go to Paris or Rome."

And he thought of Venice and Isola Rossa—of Lady Æmilia Hudson, whom he had met a day or two before—of his wife, Fiordilisa, whom he might never see again. Ah, how fared the Lily of Isola Rossa?

"Flower of May!
Who wooed thee and won thee, is far, far away."

"I don't want to inconvenience you," said Stephen. "I was only led to speak by your own proposal. You, of course, can't feel as I do. You only cared for her money. I loved her years ago, and love her still. If I had your power over her I'd take her away with me, and keep out of Morfill's way till he was tired of seeking her, and then come suddenly forward, and meet him, and kill him, and then abandon her to her fate."

"Ah," said the Seraph, "that's fine melodramatic revenge, suitable to the Surrey side. I wonder whether one could manage to make Morfill think she was gone away with you? That would be fine. You could take her, acting for me, and I could stay at home and give Morfill excellent advice, and put him off the scent; and then at last we could let him find us, all three together, and so situated that he wouldn't know which of us he ought to fight, you or me. By Jove, Langton, that's not so bad a notion. Will it suit you?"

"My dear fellow, I don't care what I do. There's no amusement for me in London. I'll do anything you tell me if we can punish Morfill. I'm tired of this monotonous business."

"Isola has not fascinated you, then?" said the Seraph.

"I verily think she would, if any woman could. She is a marvellous creature."

"A witch, sir," said the Seraph. "The Witch of Atlas, that did naughty tricks to oblige my friend, Percy Bysshe. She

puzzles me sometimes, that Isola, almost as much as I puzzle her —or you."

"She told me where you first encountered her."

"It was a curious business."

That afternoon Stephen isolated himself from his acquaintances, and took three grains of opium—a habit his reading had taught him. He ate opium when his brain wanted to be either calmed or stimulated. The magical drug will tranquillise the restless, and will arouse the somnolent. Raphael had left him with a promise to let him know what he proposed to do in reference to Morfill. And Stephen, whom recent excitement had unsettled, resorted to opium in order to obtain quietude of thought.

For a strange fantasy had seized him. His intercourse with the Seraph had become intimate to the extreme. Sometimes it appeared to him that the Seraph and he exchanged souls—that his body was inhabited by Raphael's spirit—daring, remorseless, devilishly cool. So strongly had this idea seized him, that he would consult a mirror to see whether it reflected his own or Raphael's presentment. Sometimes he fancied that it was he who had bought Isola Chester on Maidenhead Thicket—he who had for sister that wondrous Panther. And then suddenly he was himself again, longing to subjugate the Panther, to enslave her.

He took opium late in the afternoon, and strolled far eastward into the busy streets of plebeian London. He was jostled by evil-smelling crowds, in districts he had never before entered. It was a Saturday night, and in these remote regions men and women and children were doing their weekly marketing, amid the glare of gas-lit shops, amid the raucous roar of untiring costermongers. Stephen moved through these crowds in a dream, stimulated by their noisy life, but unperceptive of its details. Suddenly, as he turned a corner, a shrill voice screamed in his ear—

"Tell your fortune, young man?"

The scene to which he was aroused by this wild yell was a singular one. Behind the stall of an itinerant seller of coffee and saloop (reader, drankest thou ever saloop?—knowest thou its source and its effects?) stood a tall, gaunt, wild-eyed gipsy, telling fortunes in coffee-grounds. A group of girls surrounded the stand, pressing forward to spend their sixpences in purchasing the preternatural. The primary object of the stall had been superseded, but the juice of the orchis may fitly yield to a prophecy of the orchis. When Stephen appeared, the Romany chi, seeing, it may be supposed, a more extravagant customer, neglected the waiting girls to attract his attention. It took him a minute or two to ascertain what she wanted. When he discovered, he consented to hear her predictions.

She examined the coffee-grounds in a cup, and the palm of his hand. Then she looked at him curiously.

"You will see stranger sights than you have seen, though they were strange enough. You have had a lady at your feet, and you have a devil at your elbow, and there are three beautiful women who have reason to fear you, and three fierce men who have reason to hate you; but you will love when you marry, and you will die in your bed."

"Thank you," said Stephen dreamily, giving her a sovereign. "Good evening."

He went on. The girls with their sixpences pressed forward eagerly to learn the future.

"No," said the gipsy hag. "I have been forced to tell *him* truth. I will tell you no more lies to-night."

Stephen reached his rooms about midnight, and went straight to bed, ordering Auguste not to call him the next morning, whatever happened. He wanted one of those long nights of rest and inspiration which strengthened him for the world. And he got what he wanted—delicious sleep, yet a pageant of dreams.

He dreamt that Isola Chester and the wild-eyed gipsy were one—one prophetess, vainly prophesying his future. He dreamt that he was Raphael Branscombe, and that Claudia, his sister, confessed that she loved Stephen Langton, and that he killed her kneeling at his feet. He dreamt that he (still Raphael) wandered on a beautiful seashore with a woman more beautiful than he had ever seen, and that they stepped into a white-sailed bark, and that a tempest caught them amid the summer calm, and that they were drowned together. Yes, they lay at the very bottom of the ocean, on a bed of soft sands and tiny shells, and she was folded in his arms, and the great fish sailing by glared at them with glassy eyeballs. He dreamt (still as Raphael) that the beautiful unknown changed in his embrace to sweet Anne Page, and they were both alive again, and suddenly an old man, centuries old, stabbed her as she lay in his arms, and the hot blood from her white breast flooded him with a hideous red. Thus he dreamt, vividly, and when he awoke he found by his watch that he had slept twelve hours. He awoke refreshed in mind as well as body.

"Why," he said to himself, "should I persecute poor little Anne, or aid Raphael in his diabolical schemes? I won't do it. Anne has suffered sufficiently: to throw her into Branscombe's hands would be shameful. But is there any saving her? She seems madly in love with him. I fear that nothing I can say will be of any use.

"I had a dream of making Claudia love me. Is it possible, I wonder? She can't care about Willesden. Why shouldn't I win her? She is wonderfully beautiful. *If* she loved, by heaven, it would be a fiery passion indeed. She is seven years older than I am, I suppose; but what are seven years? I should rather like to be her master, just because she has always seemed so

much beyond me; and I would be her master if I married. Egad, the Panther should be tamed."

Somewhat after this foolish fashion Stephen soliloquised. He would leave Morfill unpunished for Anne's sake. He would try to save Anne from Raphael. He would go and tell Claudia that he loved her. He would even, he thought, venture on giving some good advice to Isola Chester.

How to begin? He began the very next day, when the hour for morning calls arrived. He ordered his horse, and rode to the Mesopotamian terrace. Mrs. Morfill was at home and alone.

"Anne," he said, after the usual commonplaces of converse, "you look upon me as an old friend, I hope?"

"Oh yes," she replied nervously, aware that such a commencement preluded some of that excellent advice that old friends think they have a right to inflict upon us.

"Don't you think it was a great pity you came to Greenwich with Mr. Branscombe? What would your husband say if he knew it?"

"I don't know," she answered faintly.

"Well, my dear Anne," proceeded Stephen, "you know I have a right to look upon you as my sister. You are only seventeen now, and I have known you ever since you were six. You are quite a child!"

"Quite a child!" she exclaimed resentfully. "Yes, everybody tells me that. Claudia put me in short frocks and beat me, and Humphrey makes me do exactly what he tells me, and that impudent Miss Chester called me baby. Nobody thinks me a woman except Raphael, and he loves me."

"Loves you, you silly girl!" interrupted Stephen, "don't you think it. He's only playing with you to revenge himself on Morfill for marrying you. Would he have made you dine at Greenwich if he loved you?"

"I don't know," she sobbed. "Everybody's against me. I know I love *him*. I'd lie down and let him tread upon me if he liked. I'd kill myself if he told me to."

At that very moment the Seraph entered.

"Ah, Langton," he said pleasantly, "you've turned traitor, eh? I heard some of your talk. You want to save this child whom you used to love. Well, I think you are right, perhaps. And yet I don't know."

He sat down and seemed to reflect. Anne remained silent. Stephen said—

"I told Mrs. Morfill you did not love her, and only cared to revenge yourself on her husband. Is not that true?"

"My dear fellow," said the Seraph, "suppose it granted, for argument's sake. Suppose I leave this poor child to that surly husband of hers. This would be right, of course—virtuous—Christian; and you imagine Mr. and Mrs. Morfill living long and prosperous years, with children around them; Morfill, M.P. and

Attorney-General, and Sir Humphrey—or even Chancellor and Baron Kingsleat; little Anne a comely and contented matron. You think this would happen? Oh, no, no. This little girl here would break her heart, would pine away, would die in a year or two; that miserable Morfill would have her money, and would be rather glad to get rid of her. Is not this true, Anne?"

"Yes," she said, her brown eyes glistening through their tears.

"Come here," he said. She came.

The Seraph smoothed from her fair brow the abundant chestnut hair, and gazed into the tearful brown eyes, and said—

"Kiss me, pet."

She kissed him as lovingly as Acme her Septimillus.

"You see, my dear Langton, that this child loves me. Now, it is a great misfortune that any one should love me, who am heartless and a breaker of hearts; but I am unable to see that I should do her any good by acting virtuously, and never seeing her again, and leaving her to be slowly murdered by the vaurien who possesses her. Marriage is a great institution, though such a marriage as Morfill's is nothing to boast of; but love is omnipotent, and will sometimes supersede even marriage. This little girl is *mine*—by a stronger claim than Morfill has. Whether I shall take her away from him I have not yet decided, but I will not kill her by refusing to see her again."

"It is a strange business," said Stephen. "You should not have made her love you, Branscombe."

"I should not, that's true. Still, mine was not the first or the greatest crime. Love *will* have its way. But Morfill should not have pretended to love her, for the sake of her money. For that scoundrelism he deserves the worst that can happen to him."

"Well," said Stephen, "I can say no more. I have loved Anne since she was a tiny child of six, and it is a bitter grief to me to see her married to a villain, and loving you so madly. I would save her from sorrow if I could, but how can I? I have a terror of what may happen to her. I fancy her a deserted, starving, wretched wanderer, dying God knows where."

"We won't let her do any of those horrid things," said the Seraph, patting her soft cheek. "If I run away with her, and Morfill shoots me, you'll take care of her, I know; but the barrel is not made that is to carry my death."

"Good-bye," said Stephen. "It is useless to talk more."

"Oh! if you're going, so am I," said the Seraph. "It's getting late, and I don't care to meet that fellow Morfill. Good-bye, Baby, I'll drop in upon you again soon."

"Soon," she said, in a low, entreating voice, "soon, very soon."

"Poor little Anne!" said the Seraph, as he and Stephen parted in the street; "I wish she did not love me; but it is too late. Shall you dine at the Chandos to-day?"

"I think I shall."

"Well, let us meet at eight. I want to talk to you. I wish that fellow Morfill would break his neck, but lawyers never do such things."

"No, confound them!" said Stephen.

"If we were in Italy now, a few gold coins would buy a stealthy stiletto. I don't approve of such things in general; but really Morfill's baseness makes me feel like a Borgia."

They parted. As Stephen rode away, the tread of his horse's hoofs, the roar of the streets, every sound that he heard, seemed to syllable themselves into

"*Too late! Too late!*"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PANTHER WOOED.

CLAUDIA BRANSCOMBE was at this period somewhat perplexed. That happy inventor of names who first called her the Panther touched in certain points the very essence of her character. She was beautiful and wild and strong. Was she loving also? The feline tribe are not, so far as we can judge. Mr. Henry Taylor, who is too often rather a prose-poet, has, at least, one passage of poetic humour in "St. Clement's Eve." There are two young ladies, Flos and Iolande, the one a charming saint, the other a charming coquette. Iolande gives Flos a lecture, in the form of a dream; pretty little naughty Flos retaliates:

"Yes, Iolande,
You're ever dreaming dreams, and when they're bad
They're always about me. I, too, can dream,
But otherwise than you. The god of dreams
Who sleeps with me is blithe and debonair,
Else should he not be partner of my bed.
I dreamt I was a cat, and much caressed,
And fed with dainty viands; there was cream,
And fish, and flesh, and porridge, but no mice;
And I was fat and sleek, but in my heart
There rose a long and melancholy mew,
Which meant *I must have mice.* And therewithal
I found myself transported to the hall
Of an old castle, with the rapturous sound
Of gnawing of old wainscot in my ears;
With that I couched and sprang, and sprang and couched,
My soul rejoicing."

The little girl's longing (for everybody knows what) is poetically given here, though some of the phraseology is stupid enough for

Tupper; but unhappily Mr. Taylor is not a poet, and nothing is more painful than to see a man straining himself to appear something which he is not and cannot be.

Well, Flos wanted mice. The Panther was not unlike her. But the Panther, who had been studying her own character intelligently enough for about a dozen years, was not yet certain of herself. She knew that she was not wholly feline, but that was almost all she knew. She had been purely feline, nothing else, in her little affair with Stephen. What might have occurred if she had got him well under those soft velvet paws of hers, she had not considered. Even cats catch Tartars now and then: a very fine Tom of mine, who pounced on a tame peregrine falcon, under the impression that he would be easy eating, was a case in point. The hawk lost a few feathers, but poor old Tom never mewed again. However, Stephen had slipped from under her velvet paws, leaving her with nothing save a vehement desire to scratch him. And now he seemed likely to give her a chance. He spent long mornings in her drawing-room. He rode with her, met her at parties, brought her bouquets and opera-boxes. He showed her a timid tranquil style of attention, which was subtly flattering. He devoted himself to her evidently.

But then there was Sir Arthur Willesden. In reference to him, Claudia had committed one of those strange blunders from which no women are free. She pined, as I have said, for subjugation. She wanted a strong hand to tame and subdue her. No such had come; and her restless fancy made a fit hero of Sir Arthur. He was big, burly, weighty, magnificent in apparel, jewellery, odours. He had that absolute self-confidence often found in men whose extreme dulness prevents their forming an accurate estimate of themselves. You couldn't flatter Sir Arthur Willesden. He verily believed himself unusually handsome, unusually clever. The Panther fascinated him; but that she was too good for him, a creature above him, a being whose brilliant vivacious opalescent nature he could not appreciate, was a notion that he would have laughed to scorn. What could be too good for Sir Arthur Willesden?

It would be untrue to say that Claudia took him at his own estimate. Not at all. There were, indeed, times of unusual clear-sightedness, when he seemed to her ridiculous—when she saw him almost what he was, an empty vulgar "swell." But so strong was her craving to be mastered, that she could not or would not shake off the notion that Sir Arthur was her predestined master. That Stephen Langton could fill that position was to her simply ridiculous. She thought of him as a mere boy—a boy whom she had petted—a fit sweetheart for little Anne.

Sometimes, it must be admitted, there came upon her with vivid remembrance that scene in the Idlechester garden, when Stephen had seemed to exercise kingly sway over her—when,

lying carelessly on the turf, with closed eyes, he had appeared to compel her lips to his by some mysterious magnetism. She could see herself blush from head to foot sometimes, when standing at night before her mirror, brushing out her long black tresses, the thought of that incident suddenly occurred to her. Stephen had mastered her then.

Again, she thought of him in another mood. Guided by evil counsel she had offered herself to him. Had she been a Circassian in some Eastern slave-market, offering herself for sale to Vizier or Sultan, she could not more thoroughly have accepted humiliation. That humiliation he had deepened unutterably by refusal. The Sultan had looked at the ivory shoulders and rosy-flushed bosom, at the bright eyes and lissom limbs, and had said, "No, she won't do." When Claudia thought keenly of this, she felt disposed to marry Stephen Langton, that she might torture him to the utmost—that she might have a comfortable matrimonial right to torture him.

It was obvious to her that Stephen was ready to make her an offer at any moment. This was not obvious about Sir Arthur. She could not quite understand this change in Stephen's conduct. She had not, as we have, followed him in his interviews with Anne Page and Isola Chester. She would probably have been extremely indignant if she had known how much pity mingled with and even prompted his present feelings towards her. His poetic temperament gave him insight into character; he saw that she deserved pity, and pitied her accordingly. But when you take to pitying a woman of surpassing beauty, the result of such pity is predicable. We know what happened to Bacchus when he found Ariadne deserted in Naxos—

> "Florens volitabat Iacchus,
> Cum thiaso Satyrorum et Nysigenis Silenis,
> Te quærens, Ariadna, tuoque incensus amore."

Hang it! I can't get over that vile habit of quoting the classics, which incenses my kind critics.

So constant a visitor at Clarges Street was Sir Arthur Willesden that Stephen seldom got a minute's *tête-à-tête* with Claudia. Raphael, who lounged into the room occasionally, was an amused spectator of the comedietta. There was the Panther almost ready to accept Sir Arthur, who didn't propose, and in a perpetual state of apprehension of a proposal from Stephen, whom she could not bring herself to accept. There was the Baronet, playing a game which often brought the lightning into Raphael's eyes—making love to Claudia, yet with an ever-present prudential care not to commit himself. And there was Stephen, not quite in love with Claudia, yet getting daily more near to the boiling-point, and assuredly eager to offer himself to her. It was very amusing to the Seraph.

At last he determined to act the part of a *Deus ex machina.* He wanted Stephen to try his luck, and have it over. So, one morning, when the four were as usual assembled, he said—

"Willesden, you are a good judge of horse-flesh, I know. I wish you'd come down to Tattersall's, and give me your opinion of a hunter I thought of buying."

They went. Stephen and the Panther were left alone. Of course they talked for some time in a constrained fashion of matters utterly uninteresting to both of them. But this could not last. The moment had come for which Stephen was longing. He saw a strange light in the mysterious depths of Claudia's black eyes. The memory of old days came upon him; the terror of two wasted lives urged him on; he rose from the seat in which he had been idly plucking a geranium to pieces, and said abruptly—

"Claudia, I love you."

Though the Panther must have expected this, its suddenness rendered her breathless. She looked at him with a strange, vague, uncertain gaze, as if to assure herself of his identity. She also rose from her seat, and stood facing him—a wondrous creature, whose beauty seemed almost terrible, whose possession a thing to be dreaded, save by a man to whom fear was unknown.

"I love you, Claudia," repeated Stephen vehemently. "Say you love *me.*"

And he approached her, putting out his hands to embrace her; but she waved him back, as Cassandra might have waved back the god whom she deluded; and she stood with bright eyes, full of fire, with one arm outstretched, as if for a moment inspired.

"Stephen," she said, "I *hate* you."

"No, Claudia, no," he went on, with eager rapidity, "you don't hate me. I won't believe it. You say it to punish me for my foolishness. O Claudia, my love, my darling! you know you loved me once—you told me so—you threw yourself into my arms, and told me so."

She laughed a scornful laugh.

"You believed *that,*" she said. "Foolish boy! It was a *lie!*"

"My God!" exclaimed Stephen Langton, starting back as if he had received a terrible blow. "My God! are *all* women false? No, Claudia—say you are deceiving me—say you loved me *then,* at least—let me think I had your love just one moment."

"Stephen Langton, you are foolish," said Claudia. "You took a mere comedy for reality. You fancied you had humiliated me. How could I care for a mere boy like you? I tried an experiment on you—a cruel experiment, perhaps—because I knew what a trivial flirt Anne Page was, and I wished to discover if you really loved her. I was glad to find you did. I should have had a higher opinion of you now, if you had not tried to persuade yourself that you were in love with me. I regret to destroy your

poetic visions, but really I never cared for you. I always thought you a child."

The Panther's change of mood was perfect. The calm and contemptuous way in which she enunciated these sentences was harder for Stephen to bear than their actual meaning.

"It is all over," he said. "Good-bye, Claudia." He caught her hand and kissed it, and left the room.

"There," said the Panther, "that's done, and I'm rather sorry for it. I've thrown away a true heart. But he is a child. He could never be my master."

She had said these words aloud. Hardly had she uttered them when the door opened, and Stephen re-entered. A change had come over him. He was impelled by a strong resolution. He walked quickly across to this wild creature who had rejected him, and caught her hands in his, and said with swift passionate emphasis—

"Claudia, you are false. You love me. You loved me that day. You are mine, and by Heaven I will have you!" He caught her in his arms. "Claudia," he said, "the truth! Tell me the truth. Do you love me?"

She had slipped from his embrace to the floor, where she knelt, one white arm on the sofa, the other resting on his knee. Her face drooped downwards, veiled by her profuse black tresses, but he forced her to look at him, though she shrank from the strong light in his eyes, though a ruddy blush covered her face; and he repeated his question—

"Tell me, do you love me?"

"Yes," she said, in a low, strange voice.

"And did you love me *then?*"

"Yes."

He arose from his seat, but she still knelt by the sofa.

"I think I know the truth now, but it is too late."

And with no further word, he went away. And Claudia knelt where he left her, stunned, stupefied, thunderstruck, while in her ears there seemed for ever to resound the fatal words—

"*Too late! too late!*"

And when she aroused herself, and sought her room, the Panther thought to herself that after all she had been wrong in her estimate of Stephen. He had power in him, this boy; he had conquered her; he had made her say she loved him, though she was by no means certain it was true. But he was her master; she would gladly be his slave and do his bidding; and she had lost him! Why was this? What had first brought him back to subjugate her, and had then taken him away, rejecting her? Was he destined for ever to humiliate her?

Stephen would have found it hard to answer these very questions. A fierce resolve had brought him back, determined to tame her; a shuddering reaction had carried him away again, he knew not why. She was as beautiful as ever; she loved him;

she knelt at his feet; he knew he had conquered her, yet in the hour of his conquest he flung her from him. Why? He was an enigma to himself. He ordered his horse, and rode out of London on the western road, through "Brentford town, a town of mud," through the towns, almost as muddy, of Hounslow and Colnbrook—he rode without pause. His horse was a good one, of Raphael's selection; but the pace at which he pushed him along the hard road sorely tried him. By and by, after about two hours' hard riding, he crossed the Thames, and passed through a long narrow-streeted little town, and found himself on a fine wide expanse of open heath, dotted with trees. As he crossed this heath, there came upon him the unpleasant knowledge that his horse was dead lame. He pulled up at a small wayside public-house—the Coach-and-Horses, or Horse-and-Groom, or something similar—and dismounted. The landlord came out—a "horsey" landlord, by good luck.

"Leave him to me, sir," said the man. "You've rode him a sight too far and too fast. I'll doctor him, though. We've got a very snug stable."

Stephen, in his present mood, was glad to be relieved from all anxiety about his horse. He sat on a wooden bench outside the house.

"Landlord," he said, "some ale."

A mighty draught he drank. The ale of Berkshire had not at that time become utterly undrinkable. Burton-on-Trent has annihilated almost all other breweries.

"Upon my life," said Stephen, after his thirst was quenched, "I am uncommonly hungry. Can you give me something to eat, landlord?"

"Bacon and eggs, sir," he suggested.

"Bacon and eggs is a very fair dish, but I should like something besides. Are those fellows intended to be eaten?" he asked, pointing to some very fine ducks that were splashing in a pond close by.

Stephen contrived to dine. Having finished, he strolled out to see the neighbourhood. He had not thought of inquiring where he was; he had ridden simply to get rid of his strange excitement; he did not know how far he was from London. But as he stood in the road looking towards London, and saw on the right the little inn, and on the left, behind an orchard, a square stone edifice with an inscription over its gateway, it suddenly occurred to him that he was on the very spot where Isola Chester, a tramp's brat, had been bought by Raphael Branscombe, the inexplicable, ten years before. Surely this was the place. Yes, that building on the left was a girls' school. A labourer came by at this moment.

"Is this Maidenhead Thicket?" asked Stephen.

"Yes, sir," he said, touching his hat.

"Why am I brought here without any design of my own?"

said Stephen to himself. "There is something strange about it. I have always been the victim of coincidences. I must unravel this mystery."

He returned to the inn.

"Landlord," he said, "how long before my horse will be fit to ride?"

"Not less than a couple of days, sir. He's very lame."

"Then he must stay here, and I'll send my groom for him. How can I get to London?"

"Very easy, sir. We've fifteen coaches up every day, and as many down. There's one due in about a quarter of an hour."

"Ah! I'm in no such hurry as that. I'm rather tired. I suppose you can give me a bed if necessary?"

"Oh yes, sir, as clean and comfortable as there is in the county."

"Very well. I'll sleep here."

The sun had just set in glory; daylight was fading; but the radiant light of a moon almost at the full compensated the loss. Stephen lighted a cigar and loitered away over the Thicket. His brain was in a whirl with this day's work. *He had tamed the Panther!* Ay, for this he had longed. She had excited within him the lust of conquest. He felt as Theseus felt when Hippolyta was his captive and slave.

But—what next?

And why was he here? Stephen firmly believed that the circumstances of his life were modified by certain special interferences. I am not saying that his belief was correct; I merely say that it was of moment, for it never ceased to influence his conduct. Finding himself at the very point where Isola Chester had been saved from the roads for heaven knows what fate, he felt an absolute assurance that he was there for some reason.

He loitered along the grassy ways of the Thicket in the silver moonlight. When he returned to the little inn he found a stage-coach just stopping in front, a tall man in a heavy cloak descending, while the guard groped in the hind boot for luggage. The bright lamps of the coach made paths of light through the mist which began to gather.

Stephen stood at the inn door, and watched. The tall man came rapidly across the plot of grass which separated the inn from the highroad, carrying a travelling-bag in one hand, a box of no great size in the other. The coach was already whirling away across the Thicket towards London.

"Landlord," said the stranger, in a voice of command, "supper. I sleep here to-night."

"You can have supper at once, sir, but I don't know about sleeping. This gentleman," indicating Stephen, "has just taken a bed."

"Well, I must sleep here, somehow. Supper first, at any rate."

A private sitting-room in this little place was impossible. Stephen and the stranger sat opposite each other by the fire. The Thicket is a good deal changed since Elizabeth's days, when the Vicar of Hurley was paid an additional salary for the peril of crossing it to preach at Maidenhead, but Stephen thought the new comer would have seemed a doubtful customer on that lonely heath. He was very brown and bearded, with sunken sinister eyes, that glared from under heavy eyebrows like torches in caverns, and a great scar across his forehead, that reddened when he spoke, and mighty gnarled hands, with massive gold rings, in which uncouth stones were set.

Stephen dreamed that he had seen this man—elsewhere—in some pre-existent state perhaps. He felt absolutely certain that there was a mysterious connection between them—that they were brought together in this inn for some strange purpose. He smoked, and sipped his ale, and waited.

The stranger supped with a fine appetite—such appetites men got outside mail-coaches in the old days. A couple of ducks had been dressed for Stephen, who had eaten about half of one; but this hungry man polished off every scrap that was left, and then devoured a hissing dish of eggs and bacon. When it was over, this meal, he filled a huge pipe with black negrohead tobacco, and said to the landlord—

"Just bring me that box, will you?"

It was not a large box—about eighteen inches square—made of oak, and well secured with brass. The landlord could scarcely lift it to the table. He made an exclamation of surprise as he placed it before its owner.

"Yes, it's heavy," he said. "Now, look here, landlord, I've had enough of your beer, and I'm going to drink some stuff of my own—medicine, you know, that my doctor prescribes for a complaint I've got. But you may charge me for every glass of hot water I use, just as well as if I put spirit in it."

Therewith he produced from the chest a good-sized bottle of rum, and a lemon of noble size.

"Try some of this, sir," he said to Stephen. "It's real old Jamaica."

It was—glorious stuff; and the lemon when cut diffused a fine fragrance through the room.

"Landlord," he said, "help yourself to a glass, and mind you put it in the bill."

After this he sat for about half an hour, drinking this superb rum, and smoking his enormously strong negrohead, apparently well pleased with his position, Stephen the while quietly studying him. At length he said—

"Landlord, how about a bed?"

"We've only one room, your honour. It's double-bedded, to be sure; but perhaps neither you nor the other gentleman would like that."

"Oh!" said Stephen, "I really do not care. At a country inn one expects to rough it. I have no objection to your occupying one of the beds, sir, if you have none."

"Good," said he. "I'm obliged to you, sir. I shan't disturb you. I've a good conscience, and can sleep soundly. But I'm not going to bed yet, so keep up the supply of hot water, landlord."

All this time there had been other guests in the little parlour—coachmen and grooms and gamekeepers of the neighbouring gentry. By eleven these were all gone, and the landlord's wife and daughter went off to bed.

"Now," said the stranger, "we can have a quiet gossip. Here, landlord, try some more rum. It won't hurt an old hand like you. How long have you kept this little inn?"

"About fifteen years, sir," said the host, who had very willingly responded to the stranger's invitation.

"You must see some queer things on the roadside sometimes. Can't you spin us a yarn?"

"I'm no hand at that kind of thing, sir, else I have seen some odd sights. Once two gentlemen came by two different coaches, one up and the other down, and went out on the Thicket and fought a duel. And another time a young lady and gentleman were running away to get married, and the lady's father overtook them just here, and she had to go back again. And another time a poor gipsy woman or tramp died just by the horse-trough, and a gentleman riding by bought a little girl she had with her, and sent her to school close here."

Somehow, Stephen was prescient of the landlord's telling Isola's story—prescient also of its producing some strange effect on the stranger. At this point the flames in those cavernous eyes gave a leap. And he said, but coolly enough—

"That was a curious fancy. How long ago is that?"

"About ten years," said the landlord.

"And is the child at school now?"

"No, sir. She ran away about two years ago with a young farmer that lived here, and we've never heard of her since."

The stranger had his tumbler in his right hand. A sudden contraction of the fingers smashed it to fragments. The landlord sprang up to remove them.

"Wait," he said; "I am interested in that girl. What has become of the young farmer who took her away?"

"He came back without her. But he got such a bad character about here, that he went off altogether. I think he went to sea."

"And nothing is known of the girl by the schoolmistress?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Who was the gentleman who bought her and sent her to school?"

"Nobody knows. He called himself Johnson, but it wasn't his name. But we heard that he took her away from Pringle—

that's the farmer she ran off with—and horsewhipped him well. He deserved it, the scamp!"

"By Heaven!" said the stranger, striking his fist heavily on the table, "I'm glad he is away from here. I should kill him. Landlord, are you *quite* sure nobody about here knows where the girl is?"

"Quite, sir."

"My God!" exclaimed the stranger, with almost a sob, "what shall I do?"

All this time Stephen Langton had not spoken.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE OLD WOLF.

STEPHEN did not speak. He sat and watched the wild old man, scarred and bearded. He felt as if he had possessed prevision of this strange occurrence. Destiny had brought him to this wayside inn—brought him face to face with the man who hungered to know what he could tell. A curious coincidence, the ordinary moraliser would say. Stephen Langton thought otherwise. For him life was full of what we call curious coincidences. When he found himself, by mere accident, a dweller at this little hostelry on Maidenhead Thicket, at whose door the mother of Isola had died, he felt conscious of an impending event.

We do not sufficiently allow for the wide differences in human temperament. Some men hear the music of the spheres; others, deaf to that sublime harmony, are delighted with what they get at the Alhambra. Some men see visions and dream dreams; others go through the world unconscious of everything that does not appeal to their senses. Some men can love, can hate, can feel; others are mere automata, for aught that can be perceived. And I am not sure that Mr. Browning has seen the whole truth in that wondrous poem of his, "Mr. Sludge the Medium." Are there not men with what may be called the preternatural temperament? Just as the poet's temperament vibrates to delicate influences utterly unfelt by an average shopkeeper, may not a certain nature feel dimly conscious of the presence or the passage of a spiritual visitant?

And as to events. "Adventures are to the adventurous," says Mr. Disraeli. This is a half truth. Many a man pines for adventure, seeks for it over wide realms and desolate seas, yet never meets it. Another shall be unable to walk down the commonplace street in which he dwells without an adventure. Ay, and

he knows that it is coming; he feels it afar off, as you feel the advent of the mist that as yet has not climbed past the horizon; he rises from his bed in the morning, and says to himself, "Something will happen to-day." Nor is that prophetic instinct ever wrong.

Well, when a chemist can tell us why the rose is red, or why magnesium gives a brilliant light, or why a drop of hydrocyanic acid extinguishes life, or why iodine cures goitre and takes sun-pictures, or why chloroform for a time annihilates the senses, then, perhaps, the philosopher may discover some reason for the differences which exist in human temperaments. But, for the man to whom there is something laughably absurd in the idea of a coexistent invisible world—a world which osculates this material world at rare points and under rare circumstances—for that man to maintain that what to him is incomprehensible is therefore impossible, is silly beyond measure. As well may the unmathematical man deride the notion that

$$y^2(2a-x)=x^3$$

is suggestive of ivy.

Let the event evolve, thought Stephen, as he gazed sometimes at his companion, sometimes at the calcined caverns of the fire. Let us see who he is, this stranger whom I have been impelled to come thirty miles to meet. We shall not part without some weighty converse. Let time reveal.

"Landlord," said the stranger after a while, "you can go to bed. This gentleman and I will stay by the fire an hour longer. If I burn down the house, I'll pay for it."

"It's contrary to my rules, sir," said the innkeeper.

"Pshaw! who told you to make rules for *us?* I obey no rules. Be off, here's a trifle for breaking your rules."

He flung upon the table a huge gold coin, bigger than a crown-piece, the product of some far foreign mint. The amazed landlord took it and went away without a word.

"I don't know why I met you here, sir," said the stranger to Stephen, after a long pause. "When I was a boy I read a singular poem about an old sailor and an albatross. The old fellow went about the world half-crazed, telling his story; and he always knew at a first glimpse the man who was bound to listen to him. Now I feel something like that. You will listen to me, that I know; and you will have something to tell me, I believe. Let's make a night of it."

The night was pretty well worn already. Stephen, however, cared little. To him it mattered not whether he slept at noonday or the noon of night. He expressed his willingness to pass the hours in any way that suited his comrade.

"You see those letters," said the stranger, pointing to a brazen M. B. on the cover of his oaken chest. "Here they are again," and he bared one of his massive arms, and showed them dis-

tinctly tattooed upon the skin, with a fierce-looking quadruped under them. Those are my initials. Mark of the Beast, some of my complimentary friends call them. Well, sir, there they are, at any rate, and here am I; and my name's Marmaduke Branscombe. Did you ever hear of the Branscombes?"

"Yes," said Stephen.

He did not feel surprised at this fresh coincidence. He seemed to have foreknown it.

"Ay, the Branscombes, of Branscombe. A wild lot—three brothers of us—Ralph and Walter and Marmaduke. I was the youngest. They sent me to school—to Winchester. I never learnt anything, never could, was always in trouble. One day the head-master tells me it was no good flogging me—it wasn't—he couldn't hurt me; so next time I did any mischief he'd expel me. Thinks I to myself, I'll expel you, old gentleman; so I just walked off to Southampton, and got a berth aboard ship. And I've been knocking about the world ever since, and never set eyes on any of my relations. They all think I'm dead long ago.

"I don't know where I haven't been, or what I haven't done. I've been a pirate, and a smuggler, and a poacher, and a highwayman. I've dug for diamonds in the Ural mountains, and wandered fortune-telling with the gipsies. My mates call me Wolf Branscombe, and I think the name suits. I'm altogether a nice fellow to sleep with in a double-bedded room in a lonely inn on Maidenhead Thicket."

Stephen laughed.

"Ay, you're made of the right stuff, and don't mean to be frightened. You needn't. I never did anything shabby. If a fellow had what I wanted, I didn't get behind him and strangle him; no, I gave him fair notice I meant to have his watch, or his money, or whatever it might be, and that he'd better be ready to fight for it. And I only want one thing of you—that is, to tell me what you know of the little girl that was brought here ten years ago."

"Is she related to you?" asked Stephen.

"She is my daughter. The fellow who sold her—he was her uncle—confessed to me what he had done, when I had my knee on his chest, and my fingers at his lying throat. And I let him go—but promised if I found she had come to harm, I would hunt him down and kill him. And so I will, by God!"

The old Wolf emphasised his resolve with a blow of his fist on the table. He looked grim and fierce, and the scar on his brow was red as blood. Stephen began to think that he was rather in a fix. He did not know how far it would be safe to tell this man where to find Isola. Poor girl! she *had* come to harm; might not her father choose to kill some one besides the scoundrel whom he threatened?

"I can wait," said Marmaduke Branscombe. "I can wait for

what you have to tell, whether it is much or little. Don't hurry yourself."

"You have never since seen either of your brothers or their children?" said Stephen tentatively.

"No, but I have heard all about them. I know that Ralph has spent all his money, and Walter's a parson. Poor old Ralph! how he used to lick me when I was a youngster. And now he's hard up. But I've got money enough for both of us; there's more in this box than'll pay his debts twice over."

"Do you know anything about his son Raphael?"

"I only know he's said to be devilish clever. *You* know him, I can see; what do you say about him?"

"Upon my word, I can't tell you," said Stephen; "sometimes I think he's a very good fellow; sometimes there seems something fiendish about him. He has always been very kind to me."

"The Branscombes are true to their friends, and know how to hate their enemies. But you have something to tell me; you have heard of my little girl. Look here; you are a gentleman, and don't want a bribe, but I'll give any man *this* who can tell me where she is."

He took from his box a superb Oriental sapphire, as big as a duck's egg, which an emperor or a bill-discounter might vainly long to buy.

"It cost me that little cut across the forehead," said the Wolf. "You may have it, if you like to tell me all you know about my little girl. It will buy any place in this county, except Windsor Castle."

"Thank you," replied Stephen; "but you rightly said just now that I did not need a bribe. I will tell you what I can. The person who bought your daughter and placed her at school was her cousin Raphael."

"My God!" exclaimed the other in amaze.

"She seems to have inherited your tendencies, for she ran away from school with a young farmer."

"Did he marry her?" interrupted Marmaduke Branscombe impetuously.

"No."

"Where is he? By Heaven, let me meet him!"

"I don't know what has become of him. Raphael followed them, and horsewhipped him, and took her away. She is living in London now."

"How does she live? What is she doing?"

"I can't tell you, indeed."

"You know her? You have spoken to her?"

"Oh yes, often."

"What is she like? Do you know—it is strange, isn't it?—I have never seen her. Never. I left England just before she was born, and though I've been twice back since, I could never hear anything about her, until the other day I met my rascally

brother-in-law. By Heaven, I frightened him! I squeezed the truth out of his lying throat; I'd have squeezed the life out if he hadn't told me all he knew."

The old Wolf paused for some time, and meditatively puffed his negrohead.

"I don't even know her name," he said at last, as if to himself. "And she will hardly be able to believe I am her father. If I thought she was happy I would go away without her knowing anything about it."

He sat in reflective mood, with corrugated brows, looking into the fire.

"No," he said after a while; "I must see her; I must get her to tell me everything. I must find out for myself whether she is happy. And I will give her money enough to tempt a prince to marry her. Is she pretty?"

"Very beautiful," answered Stephen.

The old man looked at him curiously.

"Very beautiful, eh?" he said, half in soliloquy. "Very beautiful—very young—very poor. Who shall blame *her* if she is very wicked? Not I—not her father. But there may be others to blame—others to punish."

"Well," he resumed, "I shall go to bed. I must sleep upon all this. Will you take me to her to-morrow?"

"Had you not better see your nephew first?" asked Stephen.

"Perhaps I had. We can see him to-morrow, I suppose?"

"No doubt of it. I will go with you to London, and take you straight to his house."

"That's right. And now, if you are not afraid of a wild old wolf like me, let us find out our double-bedded room."

Marmaduke Branscombe, oak chest in hand, slowly and heavily ascended the creaking stairs of the little inn. He kicked off his boots, and threw himself on one of the beds without any further undressing.

"Good night," he said; "don't be afraid to sleep."

"Not at all," said Stephen with a laugh. But he could not sleep. It was about four o'clock when they came upstairs. Stephen heard the rickety old clock on the stairs strike five and six. His companion lay still enough, only moving once or twice to fill his pipe, which Stephen could see in the darkness like an hyæna's eye in a cavern. Soon after six he suddenly sprang up, pulled on his boots, and went out. Stephen rose and watched him from the window stride rapidly away over Maidenhead Thicket, smoking as he strode.

And then, at last, Stephen Langton slept—no very healthful sleep, for potent rum and late hours have baneful tendencies. It was almost noon when he awoke—awoke uncertain where he was, what had really occurred, how much of what he remembered was actual fact, and how much mere phantasm. As he looked around the quaint, old-fashioned room, with its slanting roof and

odd bulwarks, he perceived that his companion of the previous night was even now lying upon his bed, puffing away at his negrohead. When he saw Stephen moving, he rose and stretched himself, exclaiming—

"Ha, young man, so your sleep is over at last? You youngsters can't stand the racket—your nerves are weak. I went away half-a-dozen miles some hours ago, and had a dip in the Thames, and was lucky enough to get some fish for breakfast. So now, if you like to get up I'll go and cook the fish—these country bumpkins don't understand it."

When Stephen descended he found the Wolf had been even better than his word. Not only had he dressed the fish, but he had also devilled another of those ill-fated ducks. A very grizzled old Wolf he looked by daylight—he had been knocked about evidently; his fierce face and massive hands bore many traces of hot work. Yet there was now discernible that curious faint family likeness which strangers see better than friends. Stephen could find in his countenance something that reminded him of both Raphael and Claudia.

"You are looking at my old cuts, Mr. Langton," he said. "I've been pretty nearly cut to pieces more than once. I'd a bayonet slap through my chest, and a ball through all my left ribs, and a dozen other little things that would have killed most men. Perhaps I'm born to be hanged."

He looked by no means an unlikely subject for that operation. But he was in high glee this morning, doubtless with the thought of finding his daughter, and he made a prodigious breakfast, while poor Stephen could scarcely touch anything.

"What have they called my little girl?" he asked abruptly.

"Isola," said Stephen.

"An outlandish name, Isola Branscombe! I wonder whether she'll like to see me. I wonder whether she'll wish I had been drowned or shot. I'm a rough old fellow, Mr. Langton, but I've been longing for years to see that little lass. If she's afraid of me—if she won't believe I'm her father, I'll blow my brains out."

"She can't well help believing it," said Stephen. "And as to being afraid, I don't much think she would be afraid of anything."

"Glad to hear it, sir—shows she's a Branscombe. Look here, Mr. Langton, you're doing me a great service; you must take a trifling token of remembrance."

He opened his wonderful chest and produced a diamond ring, that flashed like a star.

"Wear that for my sake," he said. "It's only a trifle."

Stephen tried hard to refuse, but the old man was obstinate. At about three o'clock they caught an up-stage, which landed them in Piccadilly at six. According to promise, Stephen led the Wolf at once to Clarges Street.

But neither Raphael nor Claudia was at home.

"He may be at the club," said Stephen. "Shall we go and see? We can leave your things at my rooms, and if you like I can give you a bed there."

"That will do," he said. "And if we find Raphael, you can just tell him at once I'm his uncle Marmaduke. It won't frighten him, I daresay."

They made their way, first to Jermyn Street, then to the Chandos. The waiters of that club are in the habit of seeing some very queer people, and did not flinch from Marmaduke's vast bulk and portentous ugliness. Stephen, on inquiry, found that the Seraph had ordered dinner for two, and was at present waiting for it in the smoking-room. Thither they went, and found Raphael, enjoying his weed in company with Humphrey Morfill. What had led that hard-working young gentleman to leave his home in Mesopotamia for a dissipated evening with the Seraph? And why did the Seraph trouble himself with him?

"Ah!" said Raphael, as they entered, "I thought I had lost you, Langton. Has anything happened?"

"One or two things," answered Stephen drily. "Allow me to introduce a very pleasant acquaintance I have made—Mr. Marmaduke Branscombe, Mr. Raphael Branscombe."

"Egad, how queer!" said the Seraph. "It's not a hoax, I see; in fact, Uncle Marmaduke, you're devilish like my father. But everybody thought you were dead years ago."

"I thought so myself more than once."

"Queer, certainly. And, may I ask, do you bring back a wife and family with you? I suppose not, as you seem to have been knocking about the world all your life."

"We'll talk of that presently," he answered, in a tone significant enough to Stephen.

"Precisely," said the Seraph. "Excuse my abrupt inquiry. We may as well all dine together."

"I am afraid I shall be rather in the way now," remarked Morfill.

"Not a bit of it. You see, Langton," said the Seraph, "Mrs. Morfill and Claudia have got some engagement together—a purely feminine affair—I don't understand it; so Morfill and I decided to dine together. As for you, you'll see yourself advertised for in all the papers to-morrow morning. Your sudden disappearance was most mysterious. Even Claudia couldn't account for it."

"Couldn't she? Well, I'm fiercely hungry, now; I have eaten no breakfast."

"No," said the Wolf, with a grunt of laughter. "We drank a little rum together last night, and the young gentleman seemed qualmish this morning."

"He's not a Branscombe," observed the Seraph.

They dined. Very soon after dinner, Humphrey Morfill, whose conversational powers seemed to have been destroyed by his unflagging attention to business, and who, probably, was not very much at his ease in Stephen's company, left them, on the plea of having important papers to look over. The trio then went off to the smoking-room. Marmaduke had said nothing about family affairs during dinner. He had talked freely, narrating a few of his adventures, one or two of which would have added a flavour to "Munchausen." Over his pipe he showed a disposition to change the subject.

"Ralph is abroad, I suppose," he said.

"Yes," said the Seraph; "he can't face the bailiffs just now."

"We'll change all that," growled the Wolf; "I'll pay his debts."

"You?"

"Ay, why not? I'm his brother; he won't be too proud to accept my help, I hope?"

"Certainly not," answered the Seraph. "But I did not suppose you had been fortunate."

"It depends on what you call fortunate. If to have got enough to buy back every inch of land that ought to be Ralph's is fortunate, then I have been. If to be kept from sleep every night by the ghosts of men I have killed is fortunate, then I have been. But, pshaw! this is nonsense. What's that ring worth, if you know a good stone when you see it?"

He pointed to the diamond he had given Stephen, who handed it to the Seraph. Raphael examined it critically.

"Well," he said, "I'm not a jeweller; but I can tell that's worth money. Five hundred pounds, perhaps."

"I don't know," said his uncle. "I only know I've got a hatful of better stones than that. And what is Walter doing? Preaching, I suppose. I hope he won't want to preach to me."

"Not very likely," said Raphael. "My uncle Walter is an excellent hand at minding his own business."

"And that's an excellent thing. Well, are the girls married? You see, though I haven't come to look after you, I have found out something about you. I know that Ralph and Walter had each a daughter."

"Neither of them is married. My sister, Claudia, is living with me."

"Well, it is time they were married, if they're ever going to. And now," continued the old man, after a long pull at his pipe, "you asked me whether I had any family. I have one child, a daughter, a very pretty girl, I am told, for I never saw her."

"Never saw her!"

"No. England got too hot for me just before she was born. And I lost sight of her for years, and have only just got a trace of her from your friend Mr. Langton."

"This is all very strange," said the Seraph. "How in the world could Langton help you?"

"Because he knew the girl—because he knew the man who saved her and protected her when her mother died on the Bath Road, at the corner of Maidenhead Thicket."

"Why, you can't mean Isola!" exclaimed the Seraph.

"Yes," said Stephen Langton, for Marmaduke did not reply; "Isola Chester is his daughter."

"The devil!" exclaimed Raphael.

"When can I see her?" said the old Wolf after a time.

"To-night!" said the Seraph promptly. "See her as soon as you like. I had better just break it to her beforehand; it will take her so much by surprise."

"You are right. I have not thanked you, Raphael, for taking care of this child, though you could not know she was a Branscombe. But I'll show my gratitude to your father as well as to you. Mr. Langton has told me what happened to her; I know you were not to blame; and as for the scoundrel who took her from school, it will be well for him if I never meet him. Now let us go."

They had not far to walk to Isola's residence. The evening was chilly; and she, curled in a vast easy chair in front of the fire, was warming her feet and sleepily reading a novel. The flickering flame seemed endlessly to change the colours of her strange hair, and still stranger eyes. What a picture she was!

"Ho! Seraph," she cried, "I'm glad to see you. Haven't you run away with Baby Morfill yet?"

"Be serious, Isola," he replied; "I have something very important to say to you."

She stretched her feet lazily at the fire, and gave him a saucy nod, as much as to say, "Go on."

"I suppose it has sometimes occurred to you that you had a father?"

"Oh yes! But he's dead, I know. Drowned at sea, they told me."

"They told you a falsehood. He is alive still. He has come back to claim you."

"He shan't have me?" she said defiantly. "He must not have me, Raphael. Of course he's a brute, or he would not have deserted my mother. You must hide me from him."

"Wait," he said; "your father is a rough sort of a man, but I should not call him a brute. And you know he has a right to you. I could not consent to hide you from him. And there's one more thing that is sure to please you, Isola; he seems to be immensely rich."

"Ha! ha!" she exclaimed gleefully, "that's charming. But tell me, how did he find me?"

"That's very curious," said the Seraph; "he found you through Stephen Langton."

"Dear old Stephen!"

"But there's something more curious still, Isola. You have never heard, of course, that an uncle of mine, my father's younger brother, ran away to sea before I was born, and has never been heard of since. Well, this is the very man. You and I are cousins."

"Oh, how delightful!" she said, springing from her chair and pirouetting. "Dear me, to think that I'm a Miss Branscombe! Quite a heavy swell, Raphael. But I *am* pleased about that, that's the truth."

"I should have been better pleased if——but never mind, Isola. Your father is waiting with Stephen at the corner. Shall I fetch him in?"

"Oh yes. You and Stephen will come too, won't you?"

"No; we should be in the way."

"But I am frightened," she urged. "Perhaps he'll be cruel to me. Are you quite sure he *is* my father?"

"Yes, you silly child. So don't be afraid; he'll be as kind to you as possible. He's longing to see you, and has been trying to find you for years. Good-bye; I'm going to fetch him."

The Seraph left her, and rejoined his uncle.

"Is she ready!" asked Marmaduke, in a voice hoarse with eagerness.

"Quite. Don't let us keep you. Good night."

Raphael and Stephen walked slowly away. The old Wolf pushed open the hall-door, which stood ajar, and entered Isola's room. She had risen, and pushed back her chair, and stood in front of the fire, looking, in her quaint costume and fanciful jewellery, with those changeful lights in her hair and eyes, more like a princess of Fairyland than an ordinary young lady. And when Marmaduke Branscombe came looming through the doorway, gaunt, grizzled, impatient, she demurely dropped a graceful curtsey, and said—

"Good evening, papa."

CHAPTER XX.

ISOLA ROSSA.

THE peaks of the Balagna were capped with snow. And a chill, icier than all the snows of the Caucasus, had fallen upon Fiordilisa, the Lily of Isola Rossa. And the little town itself was melancholy; there was less gaiety in the less frequent songs that arose under Chilina's mulberry tree; for the stranger who had brought joy to Isola Rossa had now given it grief.

The letters of Raphael Branscombe to his wife had grown

fewer and briefer. There was something forced and false in their tone. They jarred upon the ear of love. Raphael was not a fiend; he had simply great power of enjoying the present, great power of forgetting the past. What of the future? Well, it did not trouble him much. He was a Pyrrhonist as to the far future, while of the immediate future he took no count. He could sup well and sleep well, though to be called in the greyest, chilliest hours of morning to fight a duel. He could utterly forget a man killed or a woman ruined. And he could enjoy the present with a boyish and poetic glee, with a gaiety and *insouciance* which seemed dreadful to those who knew him best. Students of human nature will not readily declare such a temperament impossible. Critics will doubtless declare him a monster—a mere novelist's Frankenstein. *I know the man.*

Raphael occasionally reflected with what he called seriousness on the position in which he found himself. It was curious, if not awkward. He was married to Fiordilisa; he loved her with the purest love of which he was capable; he had spent with her the happiest days of his life. But now that, having left Isola Rossa far behind, he had re-entered London's strong and vivid life, he felt a curious reluctance to return to the idyl of that Corsican seashore. Was it indeed true that he had been there? Was the *Fantasia* a real barque, or "a painted ship upon a painted ocean?" Was there indeed such a fountain, with children playing round it—such a house of refreshment as merry guitar-playing Chilina's, with the marble bench under the mulberry tree—such a white sea-beach, veined with red coral—such a noble old patriarch as Angelo Montalti—above all, such a delicious creature, pure in her maidenhood as Eve in Eden, as Fiordilisa? Or was it all a vision? Was Fiordilisa a phantom, a myth, like the fair-haired Lilith, the first wife of Adam? Verily that picture of the mid-sea island seemed much like a dream. But the Seraph had certain bills of jewellers and others to show that it was not altogether visionary; and therefore he could not escape from the undoubtful conviction that there existed a person with a right to be called *Fiordilisa Branscombe.* Strange mixture of language between the liquid South and the harsh and guttural North.

The Seraph, at intervals, wished himself back at Isola Rossa—in the quaint Casa Montalti, living a life of the heroic age, with his Nausicaa to serve him with goat's flesh and fruit and wine, and in due time to place in his arms a young Branscombe in whom the blood of the famous races commingled. But then, he was very jolly where he was; he could not bring himself to quit the fatal fascinations of London. Besides, he had his sister Claudia to look after, and he felt a strong misgiving that there would be hard work there. Moreover, he had a strange amorous hunger for that pretty little plump Anne Page, of whom he deemed himself defrauded by Humphrey Morfill. And he felt a strong impulse to revenge himself on the said Humphrey Morfill by

means of his wife. Wherefore evil predominated over good in his mental processes.

And my last chapter's discovery of course increased the chances against our poor little Fiordilisa. There was a new uncle on the scene, an "uncle from India," as the French novelists put it. What was the grim old unexpected Wolf going to do with his doubloons and his diamonds and his daughter?

The Seraph, fond of eventful living, could not conceal from himself the fact that this abrupt apparition was what they call in dull country society "a great acquisition." Here was a man who openly announced his intention of reinstating Devil Branscombe in his ancestral acres—a man who carried about with him a box full of sapphires as big as eggs, and gold coins that resembled cheese-plates—a man who owed a heavy debt of revenge to poor Farmer Pringle, and a heavy debt of gratitude to him, the Seraph. Hang it! he must stop and see it out.

This is the species of reasoning wherewith Raphael Branscombe blocked the swift bowling of remorse. Meanwhile, what where they doing at Isola Rossa? Ah, the Lily was fading. She kept up womanfully. None ever heard from her lip a word of complaint; none ever saw a tear in her beautiful eye. A true woman, true and pure, and loving and believing, this little Corsican endured martyrdom for her recreant husband. To her the ties of civilisation were incomprehensible. She was wearily perplexed by her husband's strange absence; and as it lengthened, she began to believe he never would return; but the idea of his basely deserting her would not enter her mind. Had he not, this wise man of the world, been fool enough to send her chilly apologetic letters—had he become suddenly silent—she would have believed him dead, and gone to her grave in that faith. But those apologetic letters, which in time (as the Seraph got tired) ceased altogether, were merely an enigma to her. And when at length no news came, she faded—nothing more.

But Angelo Montalti understood better. He came, slowly and painfully, to the conclusion that Raphael Branscombe was a villain. Of this conviction nothing did he say to any man; but in the midnight solitude he agonised over the terrible blunder he had made in giving this darling of his, this cherished girl, the last of the Montalti, the sweetest flower of the race, to a wandering Englishman, of whom he knew nothing. What a fool he had been! She would die—Fiordilisa would die—and there would be a sad ending to the Montalti. Thus soliloquised venerable Angelo, in his chamber, alone.

Marc Antonio had gone round to Ajaccio in the *Fantasia* to meet the Marseilles steamer for letters. The beautiful barque came merrily round the point into the phosphorescent bay. All Isola Rossa was awaiting it that evening. All the little town was silently sympathetic with the grief of the Montalti. Chilina was there, of course, awaiting her husband. And tall old Angelo had

walked down in stately fashion, with pretty Fiordilisa leaning on his arm. Ah me, she leaned too lightly.

There was no letter.

Angelo and his grand-daughter returned slowly to the Casa Montalti. The sun was setting over that sapphire sea in beauty that would foil the words of Shelley or the colours of Titian. Had a stranger suddenly descended, as in an evil moment descended Raphael, upon Isola Rossa, he would have thought it a Paradise. He would not have dreamt that the noble old man, the exquisitely beautiful girl, who went slowly homeward amid the ruddy light, were stricken by a great grief—a great grief from a cause so commonplace as that the post had brought no letter. But let me ask my reader whether he has not known the two commonplace words, *no letter*, involve a tragedy?

Angelo Montalti sat down to supper. Fiordilisa did not allow her bitter misery to interfere with her duties. Was she not a Corsican, like Vittoria Malaspina? She served her grandfather at table, in the primitive old fashion; and brought him the viands and the wine which he loved; and made no moan, though the anguish of a lost love gnawed her innocent breast. But later in the evening, just before they went to bed, she said, in a low, constrained voice—

"Will he ever come back, grandfather?"

"I do not know, my flower," replied the old man.

"Oh I hope he will," she said—"I hope he will. Would he not love his baby, grandfather, as you love me?"

In her room that night Fiordilisa knelt before a picture of the Madonna, and confessed to the Virgin Mother a grief which yet she had scarcely confessed to herself. Ave Maria! Beautiful worship, which Doctors Colenso and Cumming, together with Archbishop Longley and Mr. Spurgeon, unite to assure me is wicked. Wicked? Possibly. Better perchance worship the Virgin Mother than Mammon or Belial, each of whom has fashionable chapels of ease among us Protestants. To whom could this crushed lily so fitly tell her sorrow as to her who bore upon her breast the Man of Sorrows—to her who knew, with a knowledge shared by no other creature, that God had become man?

However, as our poor darling Fiordilisa was a good Catholic, she needs no excuse. She belonged to a Faith with which Reason has never entered into partnership—the only lasting kind of Faith, by the way. And she knelt before her picture—and she told the Lady of Galilee what she might have told her mother, had a mother's ever-loving breast been vouchsafed to Fiordilisa in her trouble, that she knew not where her husband was, or whether ever she should see him again, and that there moved within her bosom a young life that belonged to him as well as her. And oh! how fervently those young pure lips prayed that Raphael might soon return, to embrace his child! Well—

"Saints will aid if men will call,
For the blue sky bends over all;"

and it is certain that Fiordilisa's sleep that night was calmer and happier after her prayer than it had been for a long time.

Poor child! She lies upon her snowy pillow, her too fair face flushed by a dream of *him*, her sweet lips half apart with some delicious visionary anticipation, her arm astray upon the coverlet. Well for her that in her dreams she cannot see that recreant Raphael. Well for her indeed that she cannot behold the interior of the adjacent room, where Angelo Montalti holds sleepless counsel with himself.

Angelo Montalti knew nothing of the world beyond Corsica He was a thorough islander of that marvellously romantic island. Through his long life he had never known fear or shame, he had never uttered an untruth, he had never even contemplated the possibility of doing a deed of dishonour. More than this: I doubt if Angelo Montalti had ever *heard* a falsehood. You see, he must be excused; he lived in an uncivilised country. The lie is a noble invention; they are to be pitied, doubtless, to whom it is unfamiliar; but it would be unfair to blame them.

There is good old blood in Corsica. The Buonapartes, comparatively *novi homines*, seem to have been there A.D. 947, and Mr. Bertrand Payne can only trace the progenitors of Millais the painter back to 1331. For me, I can trace no farther than Ralph de Mortimer, *tempore* William I.: but my friend James Hannay is the fellow for a genealogy. Was it not of his ancestors Bon Gualtier the inimitable wrote:—

"Hannay had a son
Who married Noah's daughter,
And nearly spoiled ta Flood
By trinking up ta water:
Which he would have done
(I at least believe it)
Had ta mixture peen
Only half Glenlivet."

Strange how family failings last through centuries! However, the Montalti, though not so preposterously antique, belonged to a good old race—a race among whom brave men and chaste women were the only men and women known. And now he found himself face to face with a terrible event. He had accepted a stranger as the husband of the last of his race. Bitterly now did he regret the simple trustfulness, natural to a man who has never deceived or been deceived. This stranger was gone, none knew whither; of his return there seemed slight hope; and Fiordilisa was shamefully deserted—would be mother of a child whose father was devoid of all honour and faith. Thus thought Angelo, wrung by a manly agony, and more than paternal pity for the last fading flower of his race.

He was bowed down by a double grief. It was sad that the Montalti should be thus insulted—that the pure old race should end disgracefully. But it was even more sad that Fiordilisa, that sweet mixture of gaiety and gentleness, that purest, most loving of women, should die of grief. Nothing less could happen to her, Angelo Montalti knew well. Her love was herself; when it died, she also must die. The old man foresaw this without question; he foresaw himself, bereaved of his daughter, wandering vaguely, a dagger in his breast, over realms which were as yet mere names to him, seeking for revenge on Raphael Branscombe. And the thought came suddenly upon him, filling him with pain—

"Shall I live to do it?"

And he also knelt—not to pray, but to vow—and he vowed that he would live to take vengeance on Raphael Branscombe.

There was no *if* in that vow. The future for him had assumed certainty.

He unlocked a quaint cabinet, of some wood blackened with age. He took down, one after another, curious weapons, that seemed to belong to the Middle Ages. One after another he examined them carefully—at last he seized a dagger with a long sharp blade of bluest steel, on which were engraved some strange Arabic characters. The handle was a cross of ivory, on which shone a plain silver plate. This weapon Angelo Montalti selected, returning the others to their places.

Then he took from a shelf in the cabinet a corrosive liquid and an engraver's tool, and on the silver plate which adorned the handle of the dagger he cut three words—twenty-two letters. It was a careful and a painful work. But Angelo Montalti grudged neither care nor pain for the purpose before him.

It is hard to describe the way of life which became the rule with Fiordilisa and her grandfather at this time. The old man was mellowed by age into the ripeness of Nestor. He was incapable of hasty conclusions. He was incapable of injustice. He had, moreover, the old man's power of prevision. He saw that a brief time must infallibly show the truth. And he had that tenderness of great age to girlish youth which Landor nobly showed in his *Heroic Idyls*, in the relation of Laertes to Agatha. To a very old man there is nothing more touching than a dainty young girl. The one is a finished product of the race: the other is its freshest bud of promise. Angelo Montalti did his utmost to conceal from the beautiful child whom he loved the fierce thirst for revenge which had seized upon him—the result of an unalterable conviction that Raphael deserved his vengeance. He was kind to her with an old man's kindness. They wandered together on that coral-tinted sand where you see Isola Rossa's blood-red cliffs glowing in the sunlight. They watched the *Fantasia* at anchor. Ah me! that was a cruel sight for our sweet Fiordilisa. That was the merry skiff which had carried her and

her Raphael over the joyous sea in the happy days of love. There it lay waiting—for a freight that might never come. And Fiordilisa waited also; waited with that divine patience and childlike faith which God has given to women, and which ought to paralyse the man who ventures to deceive them. She hid the anguish in her bosom; she faded, poor child—she could not help it; but even to her grandfather she made no complaint of Raphael, but only asked, in the supreme moments of sorrow—

"Will he come back *soon?*"

The stern old Corsican knew not how to reply to this sad questioning.

CHAPTER XXI.

THREE LOVE AFFAIRS.

CLAUDIA BRANSCOMBE, rejected abruptly by Stephen Langton, felt within her a feminine determination to marry somebody. Sir Arthur Willesden, she thought, was at her service. So, when this impertinent boy left her, she became kinder to the baronet, who thereupon presumed immensely. Sir Arthur was a man so utterly devoid of sensitiveness that it took much to move him; of all delicate shades of human feeling he was as ignorant as a blind man of colours; but if he did get an idea into his head he carried it out with that fine, obstinate, unreasoning ferocity with which a bull butts at a young lady's scarlet petticoat, under the impression apparently that it is a personal insult to himself.

Now, my feminine readers will, I trust, understand that the Panther had a somewhat difficult business in making this burly baronet believe that she really did like him a little. I wish I had the delicate hand to thoroughly work out this part of the affair. It is such a nice bit of comedy. Here's the fiery Claudia anxious to make the stolid Sir Arthur believe that she loves him. He, poor fellow, though dull enough to be member for Stamford, has sufficient wit to see that she ought not to love him. Besides, there's another element. *He can't marry her.* The Hebrews (dear descendants of Abraham) only permit him to exist on condition of his making a good marriage. Claudia Branscombe *has nothing.*

Now, if you'll get any generous manager of a theatre to pay for pure comedy, I'll work this little situation out in three acts, and put it on the stage. But I can't afford that expenditure of brain for a mere novel. I must merely narrate results. A game being played between the Panther and the Baronet, we know where lay the skill. If the Destinies gave the antagonists

anything like equal cards, we know whose must be the victory. But the Destinies didn't. They gave the baronet the ace of trumps. For when a game is played between a man and a woman, the man of necessity holds the ace of trumps—that card invincible being his *sex*. Indeed, the moment the game begins, it is lost by the female player. She can't win. She draws the game about once in a millennium.

Claudia lost. Claudia, with all her beauty, all her experience, all her dauntlessness, all her wit, lost the game to this perfumed Assyrian—this miserable *melange* of Poole and Buckmaster and Lincoln and Bennett and Jouvin and Atkinson and Truefitt, and God knows whom else. *Lost!* to this animal. Oh! if Raphael could have known in time. Raphael was not a hero—something very different, indeed; but at the critical point of this desperate damnable game, he would not have thought twice before killing Sir Arthur Willesden.

Meanwhile, what *was* Raphael doing? He was not introducing the old Wolf, his uncle, to the more exclusive regions of aristocratic society. The Wolf did not want that sort of thing, and would not have had it at any price. The Wolf had devoted himself to his daughter Isola.

Her arch "Good evening, papa," had been sufficient introduction. The Wolf, mind you, was of gentle blood; and, like our old friend Odysseus, he had seen the world, city and country, palace and hovel, princess and wench; and wide experience had given pliancy to his mind; and he could appreciate and enjoy the beauty, the quaintness, the serpentine flexile movement, the uniqueness of his daughter Isola. So the rough old boy buried himself in her *ménage*, and monopolised her. He declined Stephen's offer of quarters with him in Jermyn Street. He brought his weighty oaken casket, and much other luggage, which came later by the Plymouth waggon, to Isola's abode. The little girl was bored, but she did her duty well. She shut her door resolutely to all admirers; she excluded Raphael, whom she held in the deepest reverence as her saviour, and Stephen, whom (this in strict confidence) she loved; and she did her girlish best to rejoice the heart of this rugged old villain of a father who had just turned up to claim her, and to enrich her. Do her justice, I beg. She did not care overmuch about his gems and gold, diamonds and doubloons, sapphires and opals. She liked the idea of them, of course. What woman does not delight in adornment? The apple with which Satan tempted Eve was a jewelled fruit, I suspect. But what delighted Isola above all things was his love. It was true fatherly love: had there been no other proof, it might have shown his relationship. The old Wolf had been doing cruel and wicked and lustful things all his life. I will not defile this page with any deed of his. And yet he came home to look for his daughter; and somewhere in his flinty old heart there was a spring of love that burst out towards her. And

now he would have cut his own rascally old throat if he had thought it would do her any good. It was supreme and infinite happiness to him to sit in front of the fire in that room, where we first saw Isola, while she, strangely charming, sat lightly on his massive knee, and passed her tiny slender fingers through his mighty matted beard, and lavished upon him a daughter's endearments.

Wisely, he asked her no questions of the past. Had he done so, she would have told him truth. But he did not know how far truth would pain her, so he left her alone. Love taught him delicacy. What will not love teach as instantaneously as lightning? He caught her to his bosom, this stern old wanderer; he treated her with loving tenderness; he tried his utmost to give her happiness. *How* to do this was the problem which he could not solve. It was the only point on which he ventured to question her.

"How can I make you happy, Isola?" he would ask.

"O papa!" she would exclaim, "am I not happy enough with you? What more can I want? I'll pull your beard if you tease me."

And her fairy hands, white as snowflakes, would weave themselves into the vast waves of that noble beard, the growth of realms where razors are not known.

"But you will want to marry some day, my child," the old Wolf would say. "You are very young, I know; but youth will not last for ever, and I shan't last for ever either. And why shouldn't I find you a husband you could love?"

"There is but one man I will ever marry, papa," she said one day, "and I know he will not marry me: so why say any more about it?"

"Tell me who he is," said the Wolf sternly.

"*Never*, sir, if you talk like that. Why, you don't surely think you're going to frighten a Branscombe!" she exclaimed, springing from her seat, and clapping her hands delightedly.

"Well, I really *should* like to know who he is," said her father, whom her merry antics soothed and fascinated.

"Should you? I suppose, sir, you think you'd frighten *him* into marrying me. But I should not wish for a husband on those terms."

"I won't say a word to him, if you'll only tell me, Isola."

"And I won't tell you, papa. Why, you'd always, when I happened to be at all out of spirits, be laughing at me for being spoons upon him. No; he doesn't care twopence about this child, and this child is a little too proud to go down on her marrow-bones and say, 'Please, Mr. So-and-So, marry me, and I'll always be a very obedient wife.' If I could do anything that would make him love me, I'd do it, though I died the next minute. I'd put my hand into that fire to save him from trouble. But he doesn't care for me, papa, so I may as well shut up."

Isola moderated her slang somewhat, inasmuch as her father's

long absence abroad had rendered him unacquainted with the more recent niceties of "young English."

The old Wolf could not, from his daughter's language, ascertain who was the man whom she loved. But being a sagacious old Wolf, he thought that in process of time he might discover it from her manner to the few persons whom at this time she began to readmit. He heartily hoped it was her cousin Raphael, for whom, as her deliverer from a miserable life, she had a strong affection. Isola had been wont to *tener salon* after a pleasant lax fashion of her own, and she resumed the habit for a short time after her father's return; but by and by she declared herself tired of it, and cared to see nobody save the Seraph and Stephen. Subtle as she was, Marmaduke Branscombe did not take long to decide that it was Stephen whom his daughter loved.

Stephen, of course, paid no visits to the Panther now. And he was, therefore, glad to spend an hour occasionally in Isola's drawing-room. He greatly delighted in this strange girl. To his poetic, dreamy nature, her romantic circumstances gave her an additional charm. There seemed some destined connection between her and himself. Her rare and singular beauty, her oddities of costume and language, lent her an attraction.

Isola had given up "scamandering." She spent her evenings quietly at home with her father, except when she declared a dinner at Richmond or Hampton or Greenwich necessary to dispel her dulness. The old Wolf always took her wherever she wanted to go, and lavished upon her every luxury wealth could procure; but preferred a quiet dinner at home, and any quantity of old Jamaica and negrohead afterwards. He encouraged his nephew and Stephen to drop in unceremoniously, either to dine, or to pass the evening, or both. Stephen came often. Raphael was a much rarer visitor.

One evening the Seraph met his friend about five, and proposed going over to see if Isola would give them some dinner.

"I've got two or three things on my mind, Langton," he said. "I'm in no mood for the Club; I can be as surly as I like in the company of my dear uncle, Marmaduke, who is a surly old beggar himself. And you can amuse the child."

"How about his paying your father's debts?" asked Stephen. "Is that to come off?"

"Oh yes! The old gentleman's expected in London in about a week. There'll be a great gathering of the clan. I wish it was over. I want to be off."

"Where are you going so suddenly?"

"I've only one reason for not telling you, my dear fellow, which is that if anybody asks you, you can say you don't know."

"Well, I hope I shan't lose you for long. You're my guide, philosopher, and friend. I shall be all at sea without you."

"Faust will be better without Mephistopheles," said the Seraph.

They went to Isola's residence, and found the Wolf smoking, as usual, in an easy chair by the fire. All the maréchale and frangipanni which his dainty daughter used would not conquer that negrohead. Like Charles Lamb, he thought tobacco "the only manly scent."

"Ah!" he said, in gruff tones of hospitality, "glad to see you both. Isola's dressing for dinner. The young minx always dresses for dinner, though she's only got me to show off upon. However, she'll have you to-day."

"Yes," said the Seraph, "we came here purposely to dine, and have some of that wonderful rum."

"Ha, ha! We'll brew a mighty bowl of punch. I bought a great china punch-bowl a day or two ago; it holds twelve gallons. That'll be enough for us, I guess."

"Rather," said Raphael.

"Have you given notice to all those confounded lawyers that are pestering Ralph?"

"Yes," answered the Seraph. "I set a solicitor to work a week ago. All the claims will be ready in due time."

"You can't guess how much there is, I suppose?"

"About twenty-five thousand, besides the mortgages."

"And they're forty-five, you told me," said the Wolf. "Seventy thousand, more or less. It's not much."

"Egad, I think it's a good deal," remarked Raphael. "Where the deuce it has all gone puzzles me."

"Well, luckily I don't think it much. I paid more than double into Coutts's yesterday," said the Wolf. "We shall be ready for the rascals. I think, when they meet, I shall kick them all round, if they charge it in their bills."

He laughed ferociously. He evidently regarded a lawyer as something far worse than a brigand or a pirate. He was right, I think.

"I have made a discovery to-day," he said in a changed tone. "I have set some of my people on the track of a scoundrel I want to find. I think he's found."

"Whom do you mean?" asked his nephew.

"*Pringle*," said the old man, in a low tone.

"The devil! Where is the fellow? What do you mean to do?"

"He's in England. I don't know as yet what I shall do. Hist! here's Isola."

She entered. In her wealth of hair lay a circlet of pearls, and a loose pearl necklace fell with a graceful curve into her bosom. A low dress of light blue, soft and devoid of rustle, was set off with knots of amber ribbon. Her bright eyes brightened more when she saw her friends; she put out one little hand to Raphael, the other to Stephen; she laughed merrily and said—

"Oh, how glad I am! So you are come to dinner."

To dinner they went. Isola's dinners were now of a mixed

order. She was a dainty, delicate little bird, and liked to peck at two or three particularly nice things, just as a blackbird pecks at the cherries and peaches, and liked therewith a glass or two of some light fragrant sparkling wine. But the Wolf was a ponderous portentous feeder, a drinker of mighty draughts and strong. Isola eating her sweet-bread and sipping her Moselle, while her father devoured sirloin or steak, and drank great draughts of old ale, made up a curious contrast. The Seraph was wont to remark that at this table one could get any sort of dinner.

After dinner Isola went away to her drawing-room, and sang a song or two in rippling merry fashion, for her own delectation. "O pescator dell' onda!" came first; and then some merry, quaint chanson, with a refrain of "Larirettelarira;" and then a romance of Madrid by Alfred de Musset; and then, in sudden change to melancholy—

> "But now they are moaning
> On ilka green loaming;
> The Flowers of the Forest
> Are a' wede awa."

She had no marvellous vocal organ, this Isola; she had none of the Panther's passion and power; but she had a sweet voice, and a quick ear for all the innumerable *nuances* of song. From the sad pathos of Jane Elliot of Minto's tearful ballad to the old Frenchman's

> "Ça donc, mignonne, vien-t'-en,
> Et m'étend
> Ta bouchette coraline"—

the transition for her was easy and natural.

She wiled away an indolent half hour at the piano; then, curling her little form in her habitual fashion in a vast easy-chair, she was soon fast asleep over a novel.

Meanwhile the Wolf and his guests drank port wine. Marmaduke Branscombe had ransacked the cellars of the city wine-merchants for stuff of the right sort; and as he scattered his gold lavishly, he had got what he wanted. A magnum of Château Margaux just sufficed to cool the port, and then they went to claim coffee of Isola. The little beauty was fast asleep in her chair; and, when she awoke, looked round upon her father and his friends with an expression of drowsy amazement that was very comical.

By and by Marmaduke Branscombe produced his mighty punch-bowl, and would have brewed punch therein. But Raphael convinced him of the impossibility of doing justice to such a beverage; so a smaller vessel was brought, which, however, would hold quite enough to intoxicate three ordinary gentlemen. The Wolf showed himself a master in the art of

preparing the fragrant fascinating beverage. Stephen recollected his clerical friend's punch at the Chapter Coffee-house, and thought he was predestined to headache from that especial liquid.

"Ay," growled the Wolf, when Isola had left them "to get mops and brooms by themselves." "Ay, I have found that young Pringle. I can't make up my mind what to do with him."

"Better leave him alone," said the Seraph.

"I'll be hanged if I do. But he can't get away—he's watched—and there's no hurry. We'll settle with those cursed lawyers first."

"What is Pringle doing?"

"He's turned carrier. Comes twice a week to London with a waggon."

"Are you sure it is the man?"

"Quite sure," said Marmaduke. "He's been traced from the time you thrashed him at Brighton. My people don't make mistakes."

"I suppose we mustn't ask who your people are," said Stephen.

"You may *ask*," he said. "They're people who know their work, and do it. Look here."

He took from his pocket a small silver whistle. The room in which they sat was on the ground-floor, fronting the street. The Wolf opened the shutters, lifted the window, and blew a shrill call upon this whistle.

"We shall have the new police here," said the Seraph.

Scarcely two minutes had elapsed when the window was opened farther from the outside, and a very ruffianly head was intruded. The Wolf made some brief remark in a foreign language. The fellow shut the window and went away.

"You see I am well attended to," said Marmaduke.

"I hope you're not engaged in any awful conspiracy to dethrone His Majesty, or rob the Bank of England, or blow up the Houses of Parliament, or set the Thames on fire," said the Seraph.

"No," replied his uncle. "My work is pretty well over. The people whom I employ at present have seen some sharp service, but they have done almost all I want them to do."

"I have three things to do," he resumed. "When they are done I don't care much what happens to me. I have to set Ralph straight; that's very simple work. I have to punish that fellow Pringle. And I have to see Isola happily settled. When those things are done, I'll just go quietly into a corner, and drink rum and smoke negrohead till I die."

"But why are you in any hurry to see Isola settled?" urged Raphael. "She is very happy with you."

"No, she is not. She is a good little thing, and makes believe to be happy extremely well; but she would be a deal happier

married to a man she loved. And I could make him rich. He might live like a prince, if he liked. I wish you and she fancied one another, Raphael."

"Cousins shouldn't marry," said Stephen with a laugh. "So they say—but it's a mistake. If you've a good breed, it doesn't want crossing."

"It was a fortunate thing for me, Mr. Langton, that we met that night on the Thicket, though, no doubt, I should have learnt all about Isola from Raphael in time. But you and I were bound to meet."

"I am very glad we did," said Stephen.

When Raphael and his friend were walking homewards, arm-in-arm, under a frosty crescent moon, the former said—

"He wants you to marry Isola, Langton. Why not? She's young, and exquisitely beautiful, and rich. And—I think she loves you. Anne Page is lost to you; and as for my sister, if she would have you, she is too old. But Claudia will not marry."

Stephen made an inquiring remark to Raphael, almost in a whisper.

"*Never, by Heaven!*" said the Seraph.

Now, whether it was to Isola or Claudia Stephen's question referred, must as yet remain a mystery. Or, perchance, it had reference to neither.

"Do you think that uncle of yours will murder Pringle?" asked Stephen.

"Likely enough. He doesn't look the man to stick at anything. It was very curious that you should pick him up; but Destiny has evidently determined that you shall be mixed up with our affairs. From the day your amiable old grandfather brought you over to Kingsleat you have been drawn into the current. I can't congratulate you."

"Well," replied Stephen, "I've got some two thousand a year out of your family; and if you are right in supposing the old gentleman wants me to marry Isola, there's a prodigious fortune to be had without trouble."

"Which you won't take, I suppose?"

"You can easily guess a few of the considerations which would cause any man to hesitate."

"Why," said the Seraph, with a laugh, "you don't know where the old boy got his money. I suspect *he* didn't hesitate. However, I don't think my respected father will hesitate either, when it comes to paying his debts and making him Branscombe of Branscombe again."

"That's not all," said Stephen. "Have you ever been in love?"

"Have I! I don't think I was ever out of it. I've had no end of grand passions. And I'm in love now with Baby Morfill, as Isola calls her;—by the way, if you make Isola Mrs. Langton, you must cure her of slang."

They had strayed from their homeward path, and had unconsciously reached Waterloo Bridge. Any bridge over the Thames is a pleasant place to lounge on a moonlight night—when the misty radiance falls upon the silent city and shadowy stream. Unluckily, the parapets of Waterloo are ridiculously high. If I remember rightly, a Bœotian baronet wanted those of beautiful Westminster Bridge heightened, for the purpose of rendering suicide difficult! That's legislating for the minority with a vengeance.

The Seraph and his friend had mounted on one of the stone seats or steps, and were looking over the parapet upon the royal river, smoking thoughtfully.

"There must be a difference, Branscombe," said Stephen at length, "between your love and mine. I loved Anne Page, you know. I love her still. I thought I wanted to have revenge on Humphrey; but now my feeling towards her is such that I would implore you not to tempt her—if I thought my eloquence would move you. But I have never felt what I imagine to be love for anybody else. I had an ambition—which I don't mind confidentially confessing to you—to teach your sister that I am not a mere boy, to pet and play with; and as to little Isola—why, she fascinates and delights me as if she were a fairy—I can hardly think of her as a woman."

"She isn't; she's a Branscombe. There'd be some truth in applying Walpole's or some fellow's saying to us: The human race should be divided into *Men, Women, and Branscombes.* But how did your laudable ambition get on with the Panther? Did she scratch?"

"I don't think I should tell you."

"All right," said the Seraph. "But, look here. My worshipful uncle, for reasons which he does not assign, is going to settle the business with my father's creditors down at Idlechester. It will be convenient, in some respects. The estates are all thereabout, and a good many of the mortgagees are local people: and Drax, who is our agent, wouldn't like to be long in town. We're going to have a grand affair, I assure you; the whole of the Half Moon Hotel has been engaged for our especial use. So there'll be plenty of room for you, and you must come down and look on. It will be as good as a play."

"I shall be in the way," urged Stephen.

"Not a bit of it. My dear fellow, I should be as dull as a catalogue without you. Besides, I'm going abroad directly afterwards, and mayn't see you again for an age. We shall all be there; my father, my two uncles, Claudia, Winifred, Isola. And all the townspeople, from the Bishop downwards, will go down on their knees to us, now that we have come into our fortune; and our creditors will be plaguy polite, though they've been hunting us with sheriffs' officers for years. It will be great fun, Langton."

"Well," said Stephen, "I suppose I may as well go down

with you. Of course it will amuse me very much; but a stranger seems always in the way when a family party is assembled on business."

"You're *not* a stranger. You belong to us. You have come among us, and can't extricate yourself. And you're safe to marry a Branscombe. By Jove! it will be Winifred, I daresay, as you don't relish either of the others."

Stephen Langton laughed, and suggested turning homeward. The clock of St. Paul's struck two, and a hundred other clocks gave similar evidence of the flight of time. Dr. Young ought to have been there to moralise, in a long night-shirt, as I remember seeing him depicted in my boyhood in the frontispiece to his "Night Thoughts"—a book which, thank Heaven, I have never seen since. And a few seconds after the chronometric clangour had subsided, a sudden rocket flashed upwards from somewhere near the great Cathedral's sombre dome, leaving a momentary trail of light, and descending in a shower of blue and crimson and golden globes. It was not a meteor: they heard the hissing sound of its ascent.

"That's queer," said the Seraph. "Fireworks in London! Peel's new police must be asleep."

They strolled westward, and parted at Stephen's door, Raphael remarking—

"Then you'll come. We'll go down together. My father and uncle can take care of the girls."

Stephen Langton gave an hour to reflection when he was alone. He liked to reflect luxuriously, by his dressing-room fire, in loose costume, with a cigar. He was right, I think. When you throw off the attire which society demands of you, you isolate yourself, render yourself independent, become quite a different being. If we may judge by analogy from the freedom a man feels when he gets rid of coats and waistcoats and other gear, what a wondrous liberty the spirit or soul, or whatever you like to call it—the *Ego*—will experience when it throws off the body with which it was clothed, without being asked whether it liked the pattern, and which is so often a confounded misfit! Besides, when one has to wear that corporeal clothing till it gets shabby, and ragged, and past all patching from the sartorial empirics who write M.D. and M.R.C.S. after their names, how great will be the luxury of undressing!

"I certainly *am* drawn in among these Branscombes very queerly," reflected Stephen. "First, Mr. Page takes a fancy to me, then Claudia; then that perfectly unintelligible Seraph determines that we shall be cronies; then I get intimate with Isola, who certainly *is* a nice child; then I pick up her father at an out-of-the-way inn, where I never intend to go. I'll be hanged if it isn't odd. I wonder if they have any more missing relations for me to discover. I shall be sure to drop upon them, if there are. I'll ask Raphael to-morrow.

"And what the deuce am I to do? I've promised to go down to Idlechester, and I don't at all know how the Panther will look at me when we meet. And then, there's Isola—I'm almost tempted to make love to that little party? Would Claudia be jealous? Would there be a row? I mustn't do anything that would rile Raphael, or he'll be wanting to fight a duel, and I really don't particularly care about being shot.

"'Gad, I'll go to bed."

He carried out that wise resolve, and did not ring for his brandy and soda till noon.

As to the Seraph, he also reflected. He was rather dissatisfied with himself. This little Anne Morfill had, somehow, got a hold upon him. He had subjugated *her* without much difficulty; but now she had caught hold of him. This was absurd, unphilosophic, contrary to the law of his life. Although he looked forward with much expectation of amusement to the Idlechester gathering, he really did not like the notion of suspending his flirtation with her—a flirtation rendered facile by her intimacy with Claudia. But, bah! this was very absurd. He couldn't take her with him, clearly. 'Twould be hardly the thing to ask Morfill for the loan of his wife for a week or two. Still, mightn't Morfill be invited to the gathering, by reason of his assumed legal knowledge, and asked to bring his wife, who was, after all, half a Branscombe? Raphael, amused at his own weakness, determined to mention this to his uncle Marmaduke.

So he dropt in upon that gentleman at about eleven. Isola was not yet down; she was dressing, according to her maid's report. The old Wolf, whose early habits adhered to him even in London, had gone out, and had not returned. The Seraph sat down, and waited.

"What were you doing on Waterloo Bridge last night?" asked the Wolf when he entered, with a grim noiseless laugh, which seemed to be transacted low in his chest.

"How did you know we were there, may I ask?"

"Oh, I get plenty of news brought me. Did you notice anything unusual?"

"Well," replied the Seraph, "as you know we were there, I suppose you know what we saw. Was it *you* who were letting off fireworks?"

"Only a signal. It was odd you should be there to see it. However, it doesn't matter. What news brings you here so early?"

"No news. Only I have been thinking Morfill and his wife may as well meet us at Idlechester; so I came to suggest it."

Now, the old Wolf, whose half-sister, Algernon Page's wife, had been born after he ran away to sea, had not been much interested by what he heard of this niece of his; except one point, gathered from Isola's laughing gossip, that Raphael was "spoons" upon her. This amused him. He gave the Seraph a knowing look, and said—

"All right, my boy; you don't want your flirtation interrupted, I see. I'll ask them."

Humphrey Morfill promised to come, of course.

He foresaw possible business from the connection. He liked the idea of re-appearing in Idlechester with the Branscombes in the flush of their unexpected and most marvellous prosperity. He thought only of himself; all the rest of the world was subservient to him, the hard-working law student, soon to be a rising barrister, with Parliament and the Attorney-Generalship not far ahead, and the woolsack in the divine distance. His was the right temperament for a successful lawyer.

"A hard heart and a strong stomach," said Talleyrand, or somebody, "will carry you happily through the world." The Irishman says, "A light heart and a thin pair of breeches." Some of those sayings attributed to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord are as full of concentrated pabulum as Périgord pies—and about as wholesome.

Raphael, when he reflected on Marmaduke's acquaintance with his stroll on the bridge, and on his claim to the midnight pyrotechny, thought to himself that a deucedly queer melodramatic uncle had turned up. "And now," he said to himself, "he's going to take us all down to Idlechester, and bring us into the same inn, and invite our friends and enemies to meet us. What if he means to do some deed of horror! A massacre of the innocents—an utter destruction of all the creditors and their attendant lawyers—would have a fine effect. Just the way the Sultan pitched into the Janissaries the other day. I'm sure I don't mind, if it takes the old Wolf's fancy. It would make the papers readable for at least a week; and, by Heaven, that would be an enormous blessing. There's nothing in them now, except the howlings of a lot of unmitigated idiots who want Reform."

Thus reflected the unenlightened Seraph, who thought politics the depth of babyish silliness. But shortly the papers contained a short announcement which surprised a good many people, and interested even him, videlicet:—

"Ralph Branscombe, Esquire, of Branscombe, has arrived at the Clarendon Hotel, from the Continent."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GATHERING OF THE CLANS.

IDLECHESTER was not, normally, a dull city. A city with a bishop of latitudinarian tendencies, matched against a dean who, besides being the very lowest of Low Churchmen, was a relation of the First Minister, and had married a lady divorced by

or from somebody else, could scarcely be very dull; not to mention the fact that the Archdeacon of Riverdale, who was a near relation of that mighty potentate, the Duke of Axminster, Lord Lieutenant of the County, was the highest of High Churchmen. Socio-theologic disputes were not unusual in this sacerdotal vicinage; Bishop Bythesea, an episcopal Gallio, who cared precious little for High and Dry or Low and Slow if only he was left in peace, often desired translation to some see in which there was a slighter infusion of hot water.

Apart, however, from polemic amusements, Idlechester assuredly was not a dull city. Its society was pleasant. County and ecclesiastic society blended amicably; your county people can't condescend to an ordinary town, but a cathedral town is a different thing. People who wouldn't have been seen in the Rope Walk of Riverdale gossiped with one another in the booksellers' and drapers' shops of Idlechester High Street. It was quite a fashionable lounge indeed. You might see the Duchess of Axminster, a very pretty girl in those days, of whom the severest criticism I ever heard was that she hadn't pride enough to match the Duke, walking along the not too ample pavement with Mrs. Bythesea or Lady Hinton Powys. And all manner of pleasant ladylike dissipations came off at Idlechester. Croquet and the Social Science Association had not been invented; Jaques of Hatton Garden, Brougham and Vaux (hall), had not entered on their lofty career as purveyors of feminine amusement. But there were plenty of fixtures at Idlechester, notwithstanding. It was a city in which pretty girls got married with alarming rapidity. It was a city whose picnics, balls, archery meetings, and other pleasant arrangements for flirtation, were a caution.

But Idlechester, never dull, grew wonderfully excited in expectation of the coming of the Branscombes. Marmaduke Branscombe, whom his daughter Isola rightly described as "a wary old card," took all possible precautions to prevent the general public from knowing anything about the family assembly. But he had to engage the Half Moon Hotel; and what old Winslow knew was hardly likely to be a secret from his daughter, and I fear Jack Winslow gossiped a little. Queer rumours got into circulation. Something was to happen at a certain time in June; but *what*, nobody seemed able to conjecture. All Idlechester, however, looked forward to the date announced, and one or two people thought it worth while to make inquiry.

For example, Mrs. Bythesea thought it worth while to ask her friend, Miss Branscombe, with whom she had not corresponded for an age, what the rumour meant. And she got an answer of this sort—

"CLARGES STREET, PICCADILLY.

"DEAR CIS,—Yes, I'm coming down. So is papa. So are several others of our bad lot. I shall call and request your episcopal blessing.—Your untamed CLAUDIA."

Which note the Bishop's wife, being not precisely the same individual who once romped in a Kingsleat bedroom, thought rather impertinent. However, she deemed it advisable not to quarrel with a lady of fashion like Miss Branscombe, especially as it appeared that her father was likely to resume his ancient position. And in this the Bishop entirely agreed with her, being a thorough man of the world, and far readier to believe in the Premier than in St. Paul.

So Claudia received a marvellously affectionate epistle from her old acquaintance, and laughed over it with provoking perspicacity.

And Devil Branscombe himself, when it was noised abroad that he was indeed in London, and was coming down to Idlechester, got a note of inquiry from his true liegeman, his loyal follower, Stephen Langton the tanner. The old boy was not dead yet. Writing letters had never been a favourite business with him, but he was resolved to know what this report meant. So he indited a laborious epistle to Ralph Branscombe, at the Clarendon Hotel, where the *Idlechester Guardian*, copying the London papers, had informed him the Squire was staying; and the old gentleman handed it over with a heap of others to his son, and said—

"Write to old Langton, Raphael. He's been a true friend."

So the Seraph, whom it rather amused to write letters, sat down to delight the old tanner with the following:—

"Dear Mr. Langton,—What you have heard is quite true. My father is coming down to Idlechester on the seventh, to settle a few debts that have been outstanding rather too long, and Claudia and I shall be with him. My intimate friend, Mr. Stephen Langton, your grandson and namesake, has promised to come down with me, although he can scarcely get away from London society. We shall stay at the Half Moon Hotel, where we shall hope frequently to see you. Convey our regards to your amiable family—especially to Miss Harriet Langton, whom I have often heard my friend Stephen mention in terms of the warmest affection.—Yours, &c. Raphael Branscombe."

"There," said the Seraph to himself, after rapidly writing this epistle, "I fancy Langton's relations will be astonished, rather. I wonder what that old catamaran of a maiden aunt of his will say to my piece of flattery."

The Seraph did not know much of the nature of maiden aunts. He had never encountered the animal. Old Langton received the letter in the morning, and brought it into the breakfast-room, and read it aloud for the edification of his assembled progeny. When he had finished he said—

"The Squire don't forget old friends, you see. And how well Steve seems to be getting on!"

And Aunt Harriet exclaimed—

"The dear boy! I was sure he had never forgotten me. How glad I shall be to see him again. He was always a good boy."

Whereat one or two of his cousins, there present, grinned to excess, mindful of Aunt Harriet's past objurgations. The said cousins, sons of Uncle Charles and Uncle Tom, naturally envied Stephen; sheer luck had made him a gentleman; *they* were destined to work at a rather unpleasant trade to the end of their days. And, when they got together, these young louts of Langtons, they talked over some possible way of revenging themselves upon him for his unmerited good-fortune. They had no rapidity of imagination, and could not readily hit on a scheme of vengeance. But there was a consensus of opinion that something ought to be done to make him ridiculous. If a man unexpectedly rises in the world, his own relations are naturally aggrieved They cannot see anything in *him* which justifies his elevation above *them*. Of course, the less refined the original breed, the more certain is this feeling to arise. It was very strong in the breasts of the three or four male cousins whom Stephen Langton had at Idlechester. They would have liked to duck him in a peculiarly unsavoury tanpit. Their ultimate decision was, to await an opportunity to do something.

Far different were the feelings of old Stephen Langton, the tanner. He was not a good old man, this—as we already know. But he was loyal to the squire. And the idea that the squire should have his own again filled him with as much delight as the most loyal of cavaliers experienced when Charles II. came from over the water. And when he found the squire's son writing of *his* grandson as his intimate friend, it rejoiced his heart. His delight took a form which would have given no special satisfaction to Stephen—but still less to Stephen's uncles and cousins.

"By jingo," said the old tanner, "he's my eldest son's eldest son—and he's my namesake—and he's the only fellow in the lot with any spunk in him. *I'll leave him the business.*"

And he went off to the great Mr. Drax, and insisted on his drawing a will to this effect, and keeping it a secret. The lawyer vainly reminded his client that Stephen was already a man of property, and would not carry on the business if he had it.

"Never you mind," said the old man. "*He's my heir.* You draw up the will so that he shall have every penny and every stick that belongs to me when I die. If little Polly had lived, 'twould have been different. But Steve shall have it all now—and don't you tell a creature, Mr. Drax."

As to Aunt Harriet, whom, without offending many of my readers, I may now venture to call an elderly lady, she was delighted with Stephen's kind mention of her, as averred in Raphael Branscombe's letter. She went about boasting of it. She persuaded herself that she had been very kind to him. It is to be

regretted that, in time, we forget our own misdeeds. The Past fades; the Present glares upon us with all its sunlight. Aunt Harriet began to believe that her nephew had really been a great pet of hers, and that he ought naturally to be enthusiastic in his gratitude. So she looked forward to his arrival in this enthusiastically grateful state.

By and by the great day came. The event was ripe. Post-chaises, in the early morning, brought to the Half Moon Hotel the august travellers, who had travelled through the night. A vague tremor of excitement passed through the city of Idlechester. Post-chaises brought the travellers from town. Humphrey and his wife in one; the old Wolf and his daughter in another; Devil Branscombe and the Panther in the third. The Seraph and Stephen were, however, of a different taste. They preferred His Majesty's mail; they liked the changeable company, the possible adventure, the gay open-air travel. But adventure, though possible, is not always obtainable; and I think it will be admitted that our two friends had recently had their share.

The Half Moon had a large room in its very centre, with a corridor running round it, in which balls and concerts were wont to be given. Marmaduke Branscombe had this turned into a kind of public room, whither might come all who sought audience of his brother and Mr. Drax. With that ferocious fancy for food which pertained to him, he made even such people as bill-discounters and mortgagees eat and drink, so that this room was a perpetual refectory. Of course, any real business was carried on with greater privacy; but, for the nine or ten days in which settlement was being made, this great room was from morning to night thronged with visitors, and the old Wolf thoroughly enjoyed the humour of the scene. As for the ladies, they had a gay time of it, driving about the neighbourhood, and seeing all that was to be seen. One delicious moonlight evening they went together to those old enchanted gardens—no longer kept in the Elysian beauty in which Algernon Page had loved to keep them, but still full of marvellous bloom, and breathing a magical fragrance. The Seraph was with them, and Stephen. Mr. Morfill was having an interesting legal after-dinner conversation with Mr. Drax, whom, as a giver of briefs, he desired to impress favourably. For Stephen those gardens were haunted; there he had wandered hand in hand with his sweet Anne Page in their poetic childhood; there Claudia Branscombe had pressed upon his lips a kiss. Mrs. Morfill did not experience any feelings of remorse or even regret as she tripped along the familiar paths. One feeling only could occupy her at a time, and she was filled to the brim by that wild and wicked passion which Raphael had awakened in her heart. Not so with Claudia. That first evening amid those emerald lawns and delicious flower-plots and long lustrous avenues and sleeping lakelets was all agony to her. Her heart

throbbed with passionate fierceness. Well she remembered the days long ago, when she had humbled herself to gain Stephen's love. Now he had contemptuously rejected her. Yet she was obliged to walk with decorous placidity with him and the rest of their friends. Well for Stephen Langton, perhaps, that she did not, like many a Spanish maiden, carry a keen stiletto sheathed in her corset. As for Isola and the Seraph, the situation to them was picturesque comedy.

"You have been here before," said Raphael to Stephen, as they stood beneath the pendent acacias, still the favourite resort of the ruby-eyed ringdoves.

"Ages ago," he replied.

"Ay, but since we came down?"

"Oh yes. I came here to smoke a cigar and revive old memories a couple of nights ago."

"Quite romantic," laughed Isola; and she sang—

"Blossom of hawthorn whitens in May:
Never an end to true love's sway.
Blossom of hawthorn fades in June:
I shall be tired of my true love soon.
Blossom of hawthorn's gone in July:
Darling—I must be off—good-bye!"

Merrily rang through the garden alleys Isola's exquisite girlish voice. Not so silvery the plash of the fountains, or so musical the coo of the doves. Stephen said—

"I hope I am not quite so bad as that. When I love once, I love always."

"A mistake," said the Panther. "If you hate once, hate always; that's wise. But don't try to believe love permanent, or you'll be alone in the world, Mr. Langton; nobody else does it. You'll be isolated."

"Isolate him with Isola," said the Seraph laughingly, "and he won't mind. But don't be bitter, Claudia, or people will say you're an old maid."

"As I am. Don't you think the *rôle* suits me! I wish you'd marry, Raphael, and give me some babies to nurse. Marry Isola."

"Talking of marriage," said the Seraph, "I have been recommending Winifred to Langton, but he doesn't seem inclined to take good advice. He says she's too religious. I feel certain that he is destined to marry a Branscombe."

"Why?" asked Isola.

"Because he has become so queerly associated with us. From first to last we have borrowed him from the people over the way. You did not know, perhaps, Isola, that he was born just across the street. Have you called on your worthy relations yet, Langton?"

"No, faith. I have seen my grandfather at the Half Moon, you know."

"Irreverent boy, not to pay your respects to that charming old aunt of yours. That's a pattern of maiden aunts, if you like, Claudia. You should study her, if you want perfection in the part."

"Let us all go there in force to-morrow morning," said the Panther, "and see the tanyard. I never saw a tanyard. It must be very amusing. What do you say, Mr. Langton?"

"I shall be delighted," said Stephen. "There is something picturesque about a tanyard, and I like the smell. As to the aunt—the less said of her the better, I think."

Hence was it that this moonlight stroll in Mr. Page's gardens was followed by a morning visit to Mr. Langton's tanyard. Winifred accompanied her three cousins; the Seraph and Stephen were their cavaliers. It was very amusing to see Winifred and Isola together. The Panther to some extent understood her new-found cousin, but the Saint was utterly perplexed by the charming little vagrant's oddity and slang. Winifred was by this time more thoroughly than ever the deaconess-nun; Father Remigius confessed her still, but she had relinquished the faint half-unconscious hope she had entertained of making him renounce his vow of celibacy; she had settled down contentedly to that semi-sacerdotal old-maidenism which is so common among English ladies. Yet Winifred Branscombe was not thirty, by a year or two, and was still very beautiful.

They were a gay company in that old house of the Langtons. The gray old tanner received them with delight, and Aunt Harriet shone upon them so smilingly that they all declared her charming. They were shone that famous best bedroom in which the head of the Branscombes lay perdu, awaiting his daughter's visit, and baffling the bailiffs. They were shown the very tanpit in which the unlucky attorney had passed the night. Stephen, acting as cicerone, doubted whether he was awake or asleep, and fancied that all that had occurred since his boyhood was a dream.

The gathering of the Branscombes at Idlechester was remembered in that city for many a day. Marmaduke, resolute to do nothing by halves, set Mr. Drax to reorganise the estates, and to rebuild the old Manor-house, which had been uninhabitable for at least a quarter of a century. Everybody was paid in full, principal and interest; and everybody in gold. The old Wolf had laid in an enormous stock of sovereigns; he would have nothing to do with notes or cheques. The Idlechester bank did a good stroke of business at this period.

Of course the restoration of the Branscombes excited the county and city magnates. The Duke of Axminster drove over to visit the head of the house; minor potentates of all sorts did him honour. The Duke asked him to come to Beau Sejour while the Manor-house was rebuilding; the Bishop and Mrs. Bythesea

wanted him to bring the Panther and stay at the Palace; half a dozen equally hospitable offers were pressed upon the man who a week or two before dared not have walked down High Street.

The Mayor and Corporation of Idlechester presented him an address: the Mayor and Corporation of Kingsleat followed suit.

Meanwhile the time was fruitful of events. One afternoon, Nathaniel Narrowsmith, bill discounter, of Kingsleat, had received payment of the small amount due to him—two thousand five hundred pounds, all in gold. He had come in too late for the Idlechester bank.

"I'd just as soon have your cheque, Mr. Branscombe," he said.

"We don't give cheques," growled the Wolf. "Sorry you don't like gold."

"It's so much trouble to take home."

"Leave it till to-morrow," suggested Ralph Branscombe. "You can pay it into the bank first thing. We'll give you entertainment if you like to stay, though you have charged sixty per cent."

But the old rascal didn't like keeping his money at an inn; and wanted to get home, because the idea of his servants wasting food and drink in his absence, made him utterly miserable; so, groaning over the expense, he hired a post-chaise, and transferred thereto himself and his five canvas bags of five hundred pounds each.

Poor Nat Narrowsmith! Half way to Kingsleat the post-chaise was stopped by a couple of men on horseback, and he and the postilion were gagged and tied to a couple of trees, and the bags disappeared. It caused an immense sensation. Ralph Branscombe liberally offered a reward of a hundred pounds for the conviction of the thieves. But nothing was ever heard of them; and the unhappy bill discounter lost his money, and was never the same man afterwards.

Another event of about the same date was an assault made upon our friend Stephen by three of his disaffected cousins. They had noted his habit of taking a solitary stroll late at night in the gardens he had loved in his boyhood. Their idea was to revenge themselves upon him for his good fortune by giving him a ducking in one of the ponds which ornamented those gardens. Now it chanced, on the evening fixed by these cowardly louts for their idiotic enterprise, that the Seraph had accompanied his friend. But they resolved to carry out their scheme; Raphael was not apparently the sort of person to show fight; Stephen they believed to be a milk-sop; and they were three burly thick-set fellows of the true Langton stamp. So they made a sudden rush at the two friends in a solitary part of the gardens, and separated Stephen from his companion, and hauled him towards a piece of water. They found they had made a slight mistake. Stephen was stronger and more determined than they

fancied. But Raphael, when he saw their game, sprang after them—struck one fellow a blinding blow across the eyes with a small cane which he carried—seized a second by the wrist, giving it so sharp a twist that he yelled with pain—and exclaimed to Stephen—

"I leave the other to you."

The words were scarcely uttered when that other splashed into the water in which he had designed a ducking for his cousin. It may be supposed that the trio sneaked away in lamentable plight.

"What fools!" ejaculated the Seraph.

And the next morning there was much mirth in connection with the adventure, which, somehow or other, became generally known. It made the old tanner more resolute to adhere to that astonishing will of his.

However, this gathering of the Branscombe clan came to an end at last, after various incidents of fun, flirtation, assault, and highway robbery. The last day arrived, and there were assembled at supper the whole family, with Morfill, and old Langton, and his grandson—no others. They sat together in the cosiest room of the Half Moon—a room such as old-fashioned inns contain, but which are not to be found elsewhere. There was Devil Branscombe, lazily lying back in a huge easy chair, again the recognised chief of this wild race, again furnished with the sinews of war for as fast a life as he might choose to live. But too old for this—too old—Ralph Branscombe began clearly to see that the time had arrived for him to settle down quietly, to consider his wild oats sown, to live like a highly respectable Lord of the Manor of Kingsleat. And he accepted the rather melancholy fact. He had tasted the marrow of life. It would be hard to mention any gentlemanly wickedness in which Devil Branscombe had not participated to the utmost. His only hope was that his son Raphael would do him credit, and it was a subject on which he had not much fear.

Yet the inexperienced spectator, who had seen the Seraph this evening, would scarce have shared his father's confidence. His boyish beauty—the beauty that had ensnared Æmilia and Fiordilisa—adhered to him. He looked a creature to be petted and played with. You would not for a moment have deemed the Seraph dangerous—have imagined him to be utterly devoid both of conscience and of fear. I don't think he cared much for the changed position of his family. He had always lived a pleasant reckless life, and always meant to do so, whatever might happen; and so, though the eventful current of affairs interested him, he certainly cared less about the change in his circumstances than any other member of the family.

I can scarcely say what Claudia Branscombe felt. Her recent adventure with Stephen Langton had completely disturbed her ordinary course of thought and feeling. She would have liked

to revenge herself on that young gentleman, but saw no way to such an issue. She, of course, enjoyed the idea of plenty of money, and accordingly plenty of fun; but there was no definite hope in her heart, and it was a very vague species of happiness to which she looked forward. Perhaps she thought, now and then, of the boy-baronet.

The Rev. Walter Branscombe was there, cordially rejoicing in the improved prospects of the family, though to him personally they mattered little. He had received his long-lost brother, Marmaduke, with true Christian kindness, asking no inconvenient questions. His faith in the Branscombes took precedence of all other faith. As to Winifred, she was rather puzzled. She had some idea that the right thing for her unexpected uncle to do was to build a cathedral, or an abbey, or something. Any nice feminine endowment, of which she could have been Lady Abbess, would have been the very thing. St. Winifred was patron saint of the Branscombes, everybody knew. Why shouldn't she be a second St. Winifred? Ah, *petite*, are you not aware that this is the wicked nineteenth century—in which hypocrisy is permitted, but not sanctity—in which you can only play at being a saint?

As to Isola, who chanced to be sitting between Winifred and Mrs. Morfill, I don't think she wanted to be a saint. I know what she did want. I know she longed, pined, panted for it. I know, too, that she thought herself wholly unworthy of it. Poor Isola! so gay, so bewitching, so exquisitely formed to conquer the world—yet so humble. She would have given herself to be the slave of the man she loved.

As to our heroine, she was in a dream all this time, and it was a dream of Raphael. To be in his presence sufficed for Anne Morfill. Her keen-sighted husband must, I think, have perceived this, had he not possessed that fatal fatuity of the quick but shallow intellect which estimates itself far higher than any other entity. Humphrey Morfill was, I believe, quite as able a man as Lord Westbury, and he looked down upon Stephen Langton and Raphael Branscombe, just as Lord Westbury would probably have looked down upon, say, Count d'Orsay and Lord Byron, if he had known them. He had an impracticable incapacity for understanding faculties different from his own.

The old Wolf felt, I believe, very much like the creator of a mighty drama. To have restored his brother and recovered his daughter, surely these were mighty deeds. All was his doing. He was both dramatist and protagonist. And he had an unselfish delight in what he had accomplished, and, beyond that, thorough gratitude to Stephen Langton, from whom he had received aid so valuable; and one especial longing he had, to which he gave no utterance—that Stephen would marry Isola.

As to the two Langtons, grandfather and grandson, who completed the party on that last evening at the Half Moon, their feelings were naturally peculiar. The old tanner was rather

mystified. He was delighted at the Squire's restoration, and puzzled at the sort of share which his grandson seemed to have in it. As to Stephen the younger, to him it seemed a vision. I suspect he felt very much as De Quincey was wont to feel when, in magnificent panorama, there swept before him in his opium-dreams some tale of Troy divine, some tragic story of Thebes or Argos. Stephen Langton's principal perplexity was, what would happen when he woke.

The last hours of this last night waned rapidly. Several were going away at an early hour—the Rector and his daughter home to Kingsleat, Ralph Branscombe and Claudia and Mr. and Mrs. Morfill to London.

"Raphael," said the Wolf to the Seraph, "will you take charge of Isola to town to-morrow?"

"With pleasure. But are you not coming?"

"No; I have other business of considerable importance. You won't see me for a week perhaps."

"Well, Isola wont be afraid to trust herself with me, I know. Will you, *cugina mia?*"

She gave a merry trustful smile as answer.

"By the way," said the Seraph, "Stephen and I meant going together. I hope you're not afraid of *him*, Isola."

Isola blushed.

For some ridiculous reason, Devil Branscombe and Morfill had decided to start at an early hour in the morning. Not so Raphael. When the proposition was made to him, he replied—

"No, thank you. I never waste the hours of night, except for some good reason. Sleep comfortably in your bed a third of your day, and you may do pretty much what you like the other two-thirds."

So, when the sun was just rising the Seraph and his friend had the pleasure of seeing off a couple of post-chaises, containing four members of the party. To their surprise, when these had started, there came up to the gateway a dogcart, with an unknown personage sitting in it, and Marmaduke Branscombe, oak chest in hand as usual, got into it and took the reins.

"Good-bye, my boys," he said cheerily. "Take care of Isola."

So Raphael and Stephen returned to their sitting-room, where wisely a fire had been kept up, by which Isola at this time was sitting, half asleep. And the Seraph sent that young lady to bed authoritatively, and having done so, he said—

"Look here, Langton, we'll go by the mail. It's a deuced deal pleasanter than posting."

"Most certainly. By the way, where is the Wolf gone? and who is his friend?"

"I suppose his friend is one of those agreeable banditti who let off sky-rockets when you and I are lounging on Waterloo Bridge. *Where* the old pirate is gone I don't know; but I can guess what he's gone to do."

"What?" asked Stephen.

"*Pringle*," replied the Seraph, with emphatic laconism.

"By Jove, I hope he won't murder that bucolic idiot. Can't we prevent anything tragical?"

"I don't quite see how. We don't know where he's gone, and we haven't an idea where Pringle is. It is all mere conjecture, of the emptiest kind. No, we must leave them both to their fate."

"It would be rather awkward," said Stephen drily, "if your highly respected uncle were to be hanged, which doesn't seem entirely impossible."

"Egad, I'll take the risk," said the Seraph. "The old beggar deserves hanging, no doubt. But he looks as if he was tolerably capable of taking care of himself."

Raphael and Stephen, with that elfin beauty Isola under their convoy, did not start for London till the following day. And before leaving the Half Moon, Isola delighted the heart of Jack Winslow by a magnificent present of jewellery in remembrance of her loyal service to Devil Branscombe in days gone by. And Jack, by way of showing her appreciation of the generous gift, drove the mail the first stage towards London, the Seraph on the box by her side, chaffing her on her style of holding the ribbons.

Thus ended the famous gathering of the Branscombes at Idlechester.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PRINGLE.

JONAS PRINGLE was a flourishing specimen of the British farmer in his youth. He was of the middle height, stout and florid, and fond of beer. He rode after the hounds, and kept greyhounds for the coursing meetings. He could drink any quantity of the diabolical stuff which the bucolic lout calls beer. He had excessive pleasure in smoking the worst possible tobacco in a clay pipe. He went to church regularly. He read, with some difficulty, the news as supplied weekly by that famous periodical, the *Reading Mercury*. Though Reading is the chief town of the county in which Jonas Pringle dwelt, reading is far from being the chief accomplishment of its farmers.

Jonas Pringle's entanglement with that wicked little Isola was a surprise to himself. He never could distinctly remember how it began. He never could recollect how it was suggested that he should pretend to make love to teacher instead of pupil. Somehow or other the gay girl had bewitched the young farmer; and in her presence he possessed a capacity which never approached him elsewhere. These things are not impossible. The electric

effect of intellect has never been properly estimated. There is an undeveloped science in that direction. I may perhaps elucidate it when I have made a snug little fortune by novel writing. But it is certain—to dwell only on the roughest elements of the subject—that a great general may make an army of cowards brave, that a great preacher may make a congregation of scoundrels religious, and that a loving woman may inform a mere clod with much of her own exquisite *esprit*.

Such was the temporary effect on Jonas Pringle of our Isola's influence. He could not understand his own marvellous cleverness. Indeed, stupidity was a kind of heirloom of the Pringle family, whereof they were rather proud than otherwise; so when this Jonas found himself making love to one girl while he admired another, he could scarcely believe in his own identity. You must associate with small farmers to learn how stupid they are (out of their own vocation, of course), and how proud of their stupidity. I am not inclined to blame them. Keener intelligence would probably result in discontent—in a desire to be something entirely different from what they are.

Isola made Jonas Pringle for the time clever enough to conduct an intrigue to successful issue. We know already a good deal of what happened. In process of time they reached Brighton, and took lodgings at Hove, and there the girl of fourteen proved mistress of the situation. She was already contemptuously weary of the blatant and florid young agriculturist. She took the lead in everything. She informed the old lady whose lodgings they engaged that they were brother and sister. She would not permit him even to kiss her. Poor young man, infatuated though he was, I verily think he would gladly have escaped from her. She tyrannised over him. He heartily wished, more than once, that he had run away with the fat governess with the shoulders.

And worse things yet were in store for him. Isola was wont to make him walk with her regularly every afternoon. Gladly would Jonas Pringle have been back smoking a pipe of horribly bad tobacco with his cronies in the neighbourhood of Maidenhead; but he was Isola's slave, and dared not say her nay. And then came the terrible day when, summoned by Isola, the Seraph fell upon him on the Chain Pier, like an avenging angel indeed. The young farmer was not a coward. He could hold his own well among his lumbering equals. But when our friend Raphael came down upon him with such appalling suddenness, his presence of mind departed. He was "knocked out of time."

So the Seraph took Isola to his hotel—Pegg's, I think—Harry Pegg was a little boy at the time—and poor Jonas Pringle went miserably home to his lodgings at Hove. And at those lodgings, over which, even for this dull fellow, Isola had shed a kind of poetic halo, he had received from Raphael a contemptuous message, to the effect that he would fight him if he wished.

Pringle by no means liked the idea. He was not a coward, I have said; but both courage and cowardice have different phases; and the young farmer had no idea of setting himself up to be shot at, twelve paces off. You see he was not a gentleman. The code of honour among *gentlemen* is such that they learn to supersede physical cowardice by moral courage. At least, it was so; the foolish way in which the law has been rendered more stringent against duelling has done infinite harm; and men in the army, who are in a difficulty whether they fight or whether they decline to fight, are singularly ill-used. There are some injuries which nothing save the duel can redress; and I firmly believe that there will be a reaction from the milksop legislation of recent days. We are already beginning to flog again; I pray God we may soon begin to fight again.

Well, Pringle did not want to be shot at, and so slinked off. Raphael made no inquiry about him. He was profoundly disappointed in Isola. He had imagined a career for this wild waif, this baby Bohemian. She had run away with a stupid young farmer. It was sadly disappointing. However, he was the man to make the best of a bad bargain; so he found her a home in London, where we have already had the pleasure of meeting her.

Pringle returned to his own neighbourhood. But he found it impossible to live there. His old friends looked askance at him. His was an iniquity of a different kind from any they were accustomed to. They would sell you pork the product of choleraic pigs, or mutton which resulted from the slaughter of very invalid sheep; but the abstraction of a little girl from a boarding-school was a form of rascality to which the worthy farmers were unaccustomed. Such is life. There are men who would deem the sale of diseased pork for food a crime that deserved hanging, but who would think it very correct to run away with a pretty girl. The farmers, Pringle's friends, thought quite otherwise. They made the poor fellow's life miserable when he returned. So he got somebody to take his farm, and turned his stock into money, and, hearing of a carrier's business to be sold on the Great North Road, purchased it, and settled down to its necessary work.

The old Wolf, Marmaduke Branscombe, had traced him. Pringle's waggons started for London twice a week, from a town about forty miles down the road. In the outskirts of this town there was an old-fashioned inn, the Bel and Dragon, with a courtyard surrounded by galleries. From this inn the waggons had been wont to start, and Jonas Pringle had taken it with the carrying business. Here, late one night, some twenty-four hours after his departure from Idlechester, Marmaduke Branscombe pulled up in his dog-cart, along with a very villainous-looking ruffian who officiated as his groom and valet. We saw them depart from the cathedral city.

Jonas Pringle came out to welcome the visitors, who had driven under the gateway into the yard. There was a fine ruddy flush of brandy and water in his broad face, as he stood in the

line of light which crossed the courtyard from the bright bar-parlour. The young fellow had married; married the daughter of the man from whom he had purchased the business, a fine buxom wench, who kept him in capital order, and certainly suited him a world better than Isola would have done. Fancy Isola mated to this coarse crass carrier and innkeeper!

Marmaduke Branscombe and his henchman descended.

"Look to the mare," said the old Wolf gruffly to his follower. "I want to sleep here to-night," he said further, to Pringle; and then stalked into the bar, where a few of Pringle's cronies sat smoking and drinking, while Mrs. Pringle served them in buxom buoyant fashion. He sat down without hesitation in an arm-chair by the fireside which chanced to be unoccupied; and then, opening his marvellous chest, produced a bottle of rum and a lemon, and called for hot water. The assembled company stared at him, open-mouthed and silent. He was worthy of amazement, that grim old Wolf, lying back in his chair, and drinking rum of fragrance and flavour miraculous.

By and by Pringle came in, and the Wolf's follower, a grimmer-looking fellow than even the Wolf himself, and the company began to resume its previous loquacity. They discussed the price of wheat and of pigs; they talked of a hundred things dear to the bucolic heart. They became very gay indeed when Marmaduke, fixing his eyes upon a punch-bowl high upon an upper shelf, proposed a bowl of punch. And not only did he propose it, but he also made it—an artistic bowl, a full and fragrant, strong and steaming bowl—a bowl such as these rustics had never conceived. Very gay they got over it. Stout, red-faced Mrs. Pringle was induced to sip a glass or two, and seemed to like it.

"By the way," said Marmaduke suddenly, "didn't you use to live down Maidenhead way, Pringle?"

The landlord of the Bel and Dragon did his best to turn pale.

"I know something of those parts," he answered.

"You didn't get married down there, I guess," said the Wolf. "The 'missus' is too fine a woman for Berkshire."

Mrs. Pringle accepted the compliment, you could see. Her husband murmured something unintelligible.

"I asked the question," said the Wolf—"your health, Mrs. Pringle—I asked the question because somebody was telling me the other day of a young man of the name of Pringle running away with a girl from boarding-school. Some relation of yours, perhaps?"

The red-faced young landlord began to show unquestionable pallor. The old Wolf chuckled inwardly, and gulped a glass of punch. But Pringle's wife interposed—a *dea ex machina*—pert and decisive.

"He's got no relations that would do such things. And *I* don't look much like a boarding-school miss, do I? No, no, you've come to the wrong shop, master."

"It was a curious story I heard," said Marmaduke meditatively, puffing away at his negrohead. "The young lady was taken away to Brighton, I think; and some friend of hers followed her there. But of course it doesn't interest you; only, being the same name, I thought of it to-night when I came in."

The old Wolf looked peculiarly grim and savage. Young Pringle, although, as I have said, not a coward in ordinary circumstances, was utterly unprepared for such an attack as this. His boon companions, as well as his wife, could see that in some mysterious way it affected him. Marmaduke smoked and drank, as if to smoke and drink were life's only business; and his villainous-looking associate imitated him; but a curious chill fell upon the rest of the company, which no quantity of rum punch seemed able to dispel. By and by they dropped off, one after the other, and there was no one left save Marmaduke and his henchman, and Mr. and Mrs. Pringle.

"You can go to bed, Gregory," growled the old Wolf. "Mind and be early to-morrow."

The fellow took a final gulp of punch, and Mrs. Pringle showed him to his room.

"Send your wife to bed, Pringle," said Marmaduke, in that lady's absence, to the luckless landlord. "I want to talk to you."

Pringle began a hesitating explanation, but the Wolf stopped him at once with—"Do as I tell you."

He dared not disobey. He got rid of his spouse—how I know not—and sat down opposite his grim guest in a strange state of trepidation. Marmaduke took very little notice of him for a long time, but went on smoking and drinking without cessation.

At last he said—"Pringle, is your wife safe in her own room? Isn't she listening at some keyhole? I know what women are. Go quietly and see."

Pringle was stupefied into obedience to this terrible stranger. He crept up the stairs towards his own room. The door stood ajar, as was usual when Mrs. Pringle went first to bed; a rushlight burnt upon the table; and cautiously putting his head into the room, he saw a ruddy face upon the pillow, and heard his stout spouse snore the snore of the virtuous.

So he descended again—slowly, I must admit, for he had no special desire to face his strange guest. However, he came back and resumed his chair, and sat awaiting what might happen.

"Safe, is she?" said Marmaduke.

"Fast asleep."

"Good. Drink some more punch. This is better tobacco than yours. Help yourself."

Poor Pringle obeyed orders.

"You were the man," said Marmaduke Branscombe at last, with diabolical deliberation—"you were the man who took a young lady away from a school on Maidenhead Thicket. Is it not so?"

"Yes," said Pringle.

"You took her to Brighton?"

"Yes."

"You lived with her as your wife?"

"No," he answered. "I was willing to marry her," he went on to say, speaking with unusual volubility. "She was above me—I knew it. But she wouldn't have anything to say to me; and she laughed at me till I thought she was bewitched; and then she wrote for the gentleman who put her to school, and"——

"I know. He came down at once, and gave you the horse-whipping you richly deserved, and took her away. I know."

The old Wolf smoked for some time in silence.

"Look here, Pringle," he said at last. "I have reason to think you are telling me the truth. *Are you?*" he asked with fierce emphasis, rising from his seat, and glaring at him. "By God, if you lie, I'll find you out and kill you, wherever you are."

"It's all true that I say—I swear it is," said the landlord of the Bel and Dragon, now thoroughly frightened.

I am not astonished at his fright—Marmaduke Branscombe was not at any time nice to look at; but when that scar on his forehead grew innumerable colours with rage, and his great eyes glared fiercely down in the dark caverns where they dwelt, he was an appalling apparition. Pringle was frightened.

"It's all true—I swear it's all true," he said, over and over again; and even while, in his abject terror, he repeated this formula, rather to the old Wolf's amusement, the door was burst open, and in came Mrs. Pringle.

She had not been asleep. Infallible uxorious instinct had told her there was something wrong. She had heard Pringle creep up the creaking stairs. She had snored the snore of the virtuous with unnatural unction. And now, after vainly attempting to listen, her fear that something would happen to her husband had conquered all other fear, and she burst suddenly into the room. Her round, ruddy face was surrounded by curl-papers and a voluminously-frilled night-cap. She was rather a picture.

Marmaduke Branscombe laughed grimly and quietly as he looked at her.

"Give your wife a chair, Pringle," he said. "What can I have the pleasure of doing for you, madam?"

But, having ventured into the room, Mrs. Pringle did not know what to do next. She had an instinctive idea that there was something wrong, but could not understand what. She was naturally rather a dull woman—in this well suited to her husband—and the present position of affairs completely paralysed all her faculties.

"You had better take Mrs. Pringle to bed," said the old Wolf at last, "and then you can show me where I am to sleep."

Pringle continued obedient. When he returned, Marmaduke said—"Don't be frightened, my good fellow. I did intend to kill you, but I have altered my mind. You are a fool, I see."

And he went to bed.

And so did Pringle, who received from his wife a strangely incoherent curtain lecture. It had dawned upon her, somehow, that there was another woman involved in the affair. The dullest female intellect brightens a little with this stimulus. That her "master," to use the good country phrase, should ever have run away with a young lady from a boarding-school, was to her incredible. Yet clearly there was something in it. Clearly there was ground for objurgation. So she objurgated—in that weary whine of the stupid scold which is one of this world's worst inflictions.

Pringle fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A GLASS OF MONTRACHET.

"LET us have a glass of Montrachet together," said Stephen to the Seraph.

They had taken Claudia and Isola to see the exhibition of paintings at Somerset House. Claudia had come unwillingly, and she was getting more and more interested in the Assyrian baronet; but there was talk of trying to induce Sir Thomas to paint the portraits of the ladies, and so art was the fashion of the moment.

They went to Stephen's rooms. Auguste Lancel, his admirable valet, knew exactly what sort of a luncheon to produce for ladies. It was spread with a master's hand, and the Montrachet, to which Stephen had invited them, was decanted with skill. 'Tis a delicate wine, and needs skill.

Isola, exquisitely lost in a vast velvet chair, held her bell-glass up to the light, and regarded the pale sparkling fluid with the air of a connoisseuse, but the light which glittered in her wondrous eyes was more beautiful than the sparkle of the wine.

"You look wicked, Isola," said the Panther. It would be hard to say precisely how Claudia at this time felt towards Stephen. Before the Idlechester gathering he had kept out of her way; but that event had forced them into proximity, and they could not ignore one another. I think Claudia heartily regretted that she had discovered real strength and manliness in Stephen at the moment of altogether losing him. But she was infatuate. She had dressed up that doll, Sir Arthur Willesden, in all manner of adventitious attributes which did not belong to him—and then she fell down and worshipped him.

'Tis woman's habit this, and has absurd results now and then. Yet it is fortunate for mankind—if a woman in love could see the man she loves as he really is, instead of as she imagines him how long would her love continue?

"When are you off?" said Stephen to the Seraph.

It was tacitly understood that Raphael Branscombe was going somewhere or other very soon; he had dropped remarks to that effect in various directions; but nobody understood where he was going, or when to return.

"It's a question of days, now—hours, I may say. It doesn't quite depend on myself."

"I hope you won't be long away," said Stephen.

"Oh, so do I," exclaimed Isola with eager emphasis. "I *shall* miss you so, Seraph. Do come back soon."

"Can't promise, child," he said; "I'm rather tired of you all, and want a change."

"Complimentary," said the Panther listlessly.

"Well, hang it, Claudia," said her brother, "you give us all the impression that you're deucedly tired of *us*. I don't know what's come over you lately. I should say you were in love, if I thought our family given to that very ridiculous weakness."

"You're not, we know," she said.

"Certainly not," he replied with a laugh; "I leave that absurdity to your sex, my child. If they like to fall in love with me, 'tis another affair."

"What a coxcomb you are," said the Panther.

"But I fear it is true," interposed Stephen Langton. "All the handsomest and cleverest women do fall in love with him. He has the fatal gift of Paris."

"Paris? what do you mean?" asked Isola. "Is there any secret at Paris to make people fall in love with you? How delightful! I'll make papa take me there directly. Where do you buy it?"

"There, that's your punishment for talking classically before ladies," said the Seraph. "Even Claudia doesn't understand you, though she has read everything."

"I plead guilty," said Stephen. "But you have more than once reminded me of Alexander *Theoeides*, that's the fact. Hadn't you an interview with Aphrodite on Ida once upon a time?"

"I should not object to anything of the kind. But don't be pedantic, old fellow. Remember that you've a pretty fresh recollection of your Greek, while I've learnt languages enough to extinguish it since I left Eton. Not that I ever knew much. My great accomplishment was playing girls' parts in our Datchet Lane theatricals. We played in a coal warehouse, if I remember, after the Long Chamber performances were given up. It was great fun. You've no idea what a pretty girl I made."

"You'd do that now, I think," said Isola. "Suppose you dress up, and let's go and have a spree somewhere?"

The Panther looked horrified.

"What you used to call scamandering," said the Seraph. "I really should not mind, if I knew where to go to the spree in question; but town is very dreary just now."

"If you were anxious to cause a sensation in that particular line, you should have exhibited at Idlechester," said Claudia.

"We might have introduced you to everybody as another of Uncle Marmaduke's daughters."

Stephen, struck by a sudden idea, rang the bell.

"Auguste," he said, "what's going on to-night?"

The intelligent valet enumerated several public entertainments.

"All slow, you see," said the Seraph. "What's the use of asking?"

"Pardon, monsieur," said Lancel, "I forgot one thing. Signor Cellini has a *bal masque* to-night."

"Cellini," said Raphael; "is that the fellow who calls himself greater than Vestris? Where is it?"

"At the Clarendon Rooms," said the valet.

"Get tickets," said Stephen. "Four—it will be grand. We can dine with you, Isola, can't we, and then arrange about the dresses."

"Better get five tickets," she said. "Papa will be sure to want to go."

It was settled with electric rapidity. The Panther was not in her gayest mood, and did not enter into the fun very readily; but the contagious vivacity of her companions soon aroused her, and she made a sensible suggestion.

"If we are to have dresses fit for anything, it's absurd to leave it so late. It is two o'clock now."

"I thought Raphael could borrow a dress from you, perhaps," said Stephen.

"Look here," said the Seraph; "send your fellow round to Louis; he'll bring a costumier here in no time."

This was done, and very shortly a couple of Hebrews, male and female, had audience of the merry party, who had not yet grown tired of Montrachet. And, after much discussion, they came to a decision. Raphael, the main figure of the quartet, was to be arrayed as a lady of fashion, in the days of the Second Charles. Stephen appeared as a cavalier—a tall edition of the wicked and witty Earl of Rochester. Isola chose to be costumed as a page—a Lilliputian page she looked; a baby servitor.

"You ought to go as a baby in long clothes," laughed Stephen, "and I'd be your nurse."

The Panther was difficult to determine, but at length resolved on a Spanish costume, which suited her dark beauty and lithe figure exquisitely well. And these important arrangements being finally made, they went to dine at the Wolf's Den, as Raphael irreverently styled the residence of his uncle and Isola.

The grim old Wolf was away. He used occasionally to rush off abruptly, as if on momentous business, just scratching down a brief note to tell his daughter not to expect him. So they sat down to dinner together, these four. At about half-past nine the dresses arrived, and away went the ladies to try their part. They were soon ready. Claudia looked as if she had just stepped out of one of Alfred de Musset's lyrics; she was that very marquise whom the passionate chansonnier loved; the beautiful Andalusian, half demon and half angel, to whom he sang songs in

Madrid. He who caught the gleam of her black eyes flashing through her mask, would be fixed and fascinated at once.

As to Isola, in her close-fitting, quaint costume of azure velvet with silver tags; and cap of the same with crimson feather, hiding her beautiful hair; her silk stockings revealing the daintiest of well-cut legs and ankles—she was a marvel of Lilliput.

"Some one will steal you, Isola," said the Seraph. "Some giantess will put you in her muff and carry you away."

"I'm not afraid," she said with a laugh of silver. "Go and dress, Raphael."

There was great fun in getting him into his feminine garments—much difficulty with bodice and corset; but, when the clothing was done, nobody would have detected his real character. He was a very piquant beauty of the days of amorous comedy. There was not a masculine turn about him; Count Antony Hamilton would have recognised him as one of his own portraits.

As to Stephen, he made a very fair imitation of a Caroline cavalier. The dress is sufficiently becoming to a good-looking young fellow. He was to take the two apparent ladies under his escort, Isola following as page. A carriage came for them at eleven.

The Clarendon Rooms have disappeared in the improvements of London. But, beloved readers, if any of you remember the building of the Burlington Arcade, or even the foundation of the University of London, you will surely have both danced and dined in these dear old rascally rooms. You will remember their awkward staircases, their tortuous passages, their convenient anterooms. You will possibly have played whist and vingt-un in their card-rooms. If not, why, so much the better for you.

There was a great crush at the Clarendon to-night. When our friends arrived the fun had already become fast and furious, though the dancing was not as yet precisely Tam O'Shanterish. They were soon in the thick of adventure. A domino in blue was intriguing Stephen; the Seraph found a partner in a burly personage, magnificent in the attire of Henry VIII.; but the Spanish lady, not so easily pleased, held longer aloof, and her page kept close to her.

By and by, however, the Panther was accosted by a mask bearing a suspicious resemblance to Sir Arthur Willesden. She turned away with him; and Isola, finding herself deserted, naturally looked round for a companion. She soon found one in the shape of a gentleman over six feet high, dressed in excellent imitation of a giantess from Yorkshire, at that time being exhibited in London. A good-humoured giantess apparently, ever on the broad grin. She and Isola went through a quadrille together in grotesque fashion, and then made their way to the supper-room for champagne.

So the party were separated. Stephen, soon tired of his domino in blue, looked round for some of his companions; finding none, he strove to console himself with a domino in amber. This was a gayer creature, rather, and he took her down to supper, all the

while keeping a look-out for his missing friends. When he had polished off a prodigious quantity of pigeon-pie, with that abnormal appetite which such scenes create, he returned to the ball-room. There, to his satisfaction, he found that the Seraph and Claudia had joined each other; they were walking up and down in the pauses of the dance with a buoyant vivacity which attracted numberless eyes. Stephen tried vainly to shake off his amber domino, in order to join them. All at once their way was impeded by three or four resolute admirers. They were surrounded. Some of these fellows had evidently found the wine too potent. One stalwart personage, dressed as a Highlander, "shivering in kilt," as Theodore Hook has it, made a sudden attempt to embrace the Seraph, whose masculine character was unsuspected. This was too much. Down he went with a well-planted facer from Raphael's rapid fist; and then the Seraph and his sister slipped into an anteroom, where Stephen at once joined them.

"We shall have a row," he said. "These fellows are half of them drunk. I should be for going home at once, only I can't imagine where Isola is."

"Who the deuce cares for a row!" said the Seraph contemptuously. "If you and I can't take care of Claudia, it's queer. We'll keep together, and stroll through the rooms, and look for Isola."

This they did accordingly, and encountered no further molestation. The Highlander had disappeared. The Seraph's prowess had astonished and appalled these ebrious Lotharios. A lady who could hit so straight and hard, though in the costume of a Duchess of Portsmouth, was not with impunity to be annoyed.

But where was the page, the dainty Lilliputian in azure velvet? They could not find her in any of the rooms. It is notoriously difficult to find a friend in an ever-moving crowd—especially when that crowd surges through a labyrinth of rooms and anterooms. The company grew thinner—but no Isola.

At length there seemed a sudden tendency of the whole crowd of revellers in one direction, as if led by a rumour or a noise. Stephen and his companions went with the rest. The current of motley humanity drew them to one of the entrances. The folding doors were open; and as they looked down the wide stone staircase, they saw a strange sight below them.

It was a giantess flying down those steps, with a pretty page in azure velvet grasped in her mighty embrace.

"Stop her!" shouted Stephen in a thunderous voice, rushing down the stairs with headlong haste, much to the discomfiture of the crowd below.

But before he could reach the hall the scene had changed. There was a struggle—a flash of steel; the giantess lay on the ground, a stream of blood staining her dress; and he had a momentary vision of Isola, full in the glare of gas, which brought out the strange opalescent splendour of her wild eyes and wondrous hair, uncovered and dishevelled. On the instant she was gone; but he picked up the jaunty cap with its crimson plume.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WOLF'S DEN.

WASN'T there a sensation that night at the Clarendon Rooms? Didn't the new police muster in force? Weren't the inspectors of that Peelite phalanx preternaturally wise! Didn't sex amusingly betray itself—gallant cavaliers fainting at the sight of blood, while charmingly coquettish ladies did their utmost to revive them? It was truly a curious scene.

Stephen, having picked up Isola's cap, had stepped forward to the entrance, and peered vaguely into the street—of course, without perceiving any trace of the runaway. Returning, he found a group around the giantess—as I have hitherto styled the stupid masquerader who had attempted to carry away Isola—and ascertained that the only harm the fellow had received was a stab through the fleshiest part of his right arm. Like most men of vast bulk, he was a coward, and had fainted at the sight of his own blood. Who he was, concerns not this history. Uncommonly glad was he to escape from all inquiry, and deposit himself in a hackney coach, and slink out of the way altogether; which, with an impromptu bandage of handkerchiefs around his huge arm, he was permitted to do.

"We may as well be off," said the Seraph. "That little party will find her way back to the Den. Let us go."

The carriage was ready, and away they went towards the quiet street.

"I hope she has come to no harm," said the Panther.

"Harm!" laughed the Seraph. "Harm! Why, Claudia, I shouldn't have much fear of *you* in such a contingency; but Isola—pshaw! We shall find her waiting for us."

"Do you really think so?" asked Stephen.

"Unquestionably. What's to prevent it? After so thoroughly shutting up her giantess, I wonder you can doubt her ability to take care of herself."

Raphael was right. When they reached the Wolf's Den, they found Isola sitting by a comfortable fire—the morning was growing chilly—with a *pâté des foies gras* before her, and a bottle of Moselle open. She had got rid of her page's dress, and was comfortably attired in one of the loose wrappers which arrided her. On the white cloth lay a tiny jewelled stiletto, with *blood* upon its blade.

"Well," said the Seraph, shaking down his brocaded petticoats, "this looks deucedly comfortable."

And then he pulled off his long gloves, and made a great gap in the *pâté*, and filled a huge goblet with Moselle. And Isola gaily sang the chorus of the poet-king's old humorous melancholy song:—

"And we'll gang nae mair a-roving,
A-roving in the night;
We'll gang nae mair a-roving,
Let the moon shine e'er so bright."

"Well," said Stephen, as he helped the Panther to some *pâté*, "this is what comes of a glass of Montrachet."

"Now, Isola," said Claudia, "tell us your adventures."

"All right," she said. "I'm all there. The giantess caught a Tartar, rather. You know it struck me before I started that I wasn't very big; and your saying somebody might carry me away made me think of this little article." She took up the tiny dagger, and poised it on her delicate little hand. "I didn't expect to have to use it; but I thought I'd be safe. Well, that big woman made up to me, and was great fun. You should have seen us dance. And then we sloped off to have some supper; and she—that is, he—tried to make me drink a lot of wine, but I didn't quite see it; and then we got away into one of the side rooms, and flirted like a thousand of bricks. And the scoundrel wanted to find out who I was, and where I lived, and to make an appointment with me; but I wasn't to be done, as he soon found out. And at last, when he thought the coast was clear, he took me in his arms, the beggar! and rushed off with me down the staircase as hard as he could pelt. And then at the bottom I managed to get hold of this little affair—he was holding me so tight I couldn't move my arms before—and just gave him a sharp prod in the arm. By St. George, he dropped me like a red-hot coal. I never saw such a gonoph. And then, you know, I made tracks, and got here safe as eggs, and pulled off my togs. I made Lotty light a fire, and get supper. Which, golopshious it is," she concluded, helping herself to more *pâté*.

It is amazing what little women can eat and drink.

"You don't seem to care much about the fate of your big friend," said the Seraph.

"I don't quite see why I should. The fellow wasn't particularly polite to me. And I know I didn't hurt him; I just bled him a little with this lancet."

"He looked as if a little bleeding would do him good," said Stephen. "He ought to be greatly obliged to you. If he knew where you live, I should think he'd call and thank you."

"I don't want to see him, I'm sure. I hate big, stupid, cowardly men."

"You should fall in love with Branscombe," said Stephen. "He's neither of the three."

I am sorry to record that this party of four sat chatting in this careless, pointless fashion, long after broad daylight had brightened the street. Supper, indeed, merged in breakfast.

Night work tells. A shiver crept over the party. Isola called for coffee—which came, with an accompaniment of grilled chicken and other hot comestibles.

"By Jove," said the Seraph, "we've been eating and drinking

ever since we accepted your unlucky invitation to lunch, Langton. I suspect a little sleep for a change would do us all good."

Can anybody tell me why people have so strong a disinclination to go to bed after a certain hour is past? Is is an enigma to me. Dull as may be one's associates—ay, and one's self also—there is the most unaccountable aversion from the pleasant couch, which, soft and warm and white, awaits one with unreproachful bosom. Of course, if a man is conscious that his *placens uxor* is implacably waiting for him, it is quite another thing. But to be dog-tired, to be conscious that the yielding bed is ready, and that you have only to lock your door and undress to be in the soft arms of silence and sleep—and yet to waste the hours in amusements of which you are utterly weary, is so strange, so inexplicable a proceeding. I have done it hundreds of times, wondering at myself all the while. All these four people were aware that the right thing to do was to go to bed, but not one of them moved. Isola excepted, they were still in their masquerade dresses, and a queer picture they made. The Seraph, tough and well-seasoned, showed no symptom of weariness, and looked a very easy-going and careless young lady, indeed.

"I am doubtful," he said, after a pause, "whether I shall go to bed at all. A warm bath will make me as fresh as paint, as Isola would say."

"That's a mistake," said Stephen; "you feel it afterwards. I think we had better move at once. What say you, Miss Branscombe?"

"I am almost too sleepy to move," she said, with a yawn.

At this moment the door opened, and Marmaduke Branscombe entered, followed by the villainous-looking comrade who was with him at Pringle's. The old Wolf looked round upon the company with a glare of amazement and surprise. His daughter clapped her hands merrily, and broke into one of her silvery peals of laughter.

"Why, who's this?" he exclaimed in bewildered interrogation. He recognised Stephen and the Panther after the first glance, but Raphael puzzled him.

The Seraph was equal to the occasion. He rose and saluted the old gentleman with a stately curtsey. "You're just in time to have supper with us, Uncle Marmaduke," he said in a feminine falsetto.

"Supper!" exclaimed the old Wolf. "Why, Isola, what is it? Who's that lady?"

"That lady is a gentleman," she replied with a laugh. "You can't have forgotten Mr. Raphael Branscombe."

"Well," he growled, "you do make a stunning girl, Raphael. Have you been out like that? Did anybody make love to you?"

"Yes," he said, "somebody did, and I knocked him down for his politeness. But you should hear your daughter's adventure."

And he reported to the old gentleman the way in which Isola had distinguished herself.

"A good girl," said the Wolf, taking up the stiletto, and pass-

ing his thumb along the edge. "A chip of the old block! You know how to take care of yourself, Isola."

"We were just going when you came in," said Langton. "It's rather late, and we want some sleep."

"You can sleep here, all of you, if you like," he said. "I've plenty of beds. I don't like turning people out when they've had a wet night."

"'Gad," said the Seraph, "that's a fine idea. Show us your cribs, uncle. Then we shall be all together to begin another evening. What do you say, Langton?"

"I'm game; but what does Miss Branscombe say?"

The Panther was asleep.

"'Twould be a shame for her to go to Clarges Street when there's a bed nearer."

So Isola guided her cousin to a room. The old Wolf had fitted up a considerable number of very comfortable bed-chambers, several of them with two beds. His hospitality was generous; he had numerous visitors of all sorts; and, after what he called a wet night, he liked to be able to stow away his guests in close proximity to himself, so as to begin a second revel by way of epilogue to the first.

Claudia Branscombe was tired out. I think that fine spirit of hers had lost some of its original nerve. She had failed once or twice, and it had quelled her courage. She had been lamentably foiled by Stephen at Idlechester; and then, recommencing the contest in London, she had been subjugated and rejected. And she was playing anything but a satisfactory game with the Assyrian baronet. These things had cowed her; else, in truth, I do not think the Panther would have been so thoroughly knocked up by a glass of Montrachet and its consequences. She could scarcely undress; and when, with Isola's help, she was safely in bed, she fell asleep with that delicious suddenness for which it is worth while to undergo any fatigue. She slept in Elysium. As to Isola, the wayward little beauty seemed scarcely tired at all. Having got rid of Claudia, she ran down again to take a final leave of her father, who had lighted his pipe, and was talking to Raphael and Stephen.

"Claudia was asleep before she was in bed," she observed. "And now, I'm off. Good morning to you all. Don't keep those boys up any longer, papa."

"We'll be off too," said the Seraph. "I suppose you can send round for some of our people by and by. I don't much care for walking about London in petticoats."

"Nobody would suspect you," said the Wolf. "But come along. I'll show you your room."

He led them to a large room at the back, in which were two beds. It was fitted up with every luxury, and a good fire had been lighted. I don't object to a fire in a large bedroom even in warmish weather; and Marmaduke Branscombe was of the same way of thinking.

"By Jove!" said the Seraph, throwing himself into an easy-chair, and stretching his legs, with small regard to his petticoats, "this is pleasant. Where's your cigar-case, Langton? I *must* have a smoke."

"You'll want a *fille de chambre* to undress you," said Langton.

"Egad, yes. I thought I should never get into these blessed things, and now I don't see my way out of them. Thank Heaven, I'm not a girl!"

"Or you couldn't make love to them, as Montaigne or somebody said."

"The reply to that is Lady Mary's remark—that her only reason for being glad that she was a woman was that she should not be obliged to marry one. But, I say, old fellow, do you think the Wolf has any sinister reason for keeping us all here to sleep? Mayn't he mean to murder us?" As Raphael said this, he was running a penknife through the troublesome fastenings of his dress, by way of cutting the Gordian knots of feminine attire.

"I don't see any good he could gain by such a proceeding," said Langton. "I suspect he wouldn't hesitate long if there were. He's a nice old boy."

Herewith he was about to spring into bed, when there came a knock at the chamber door. The Seraph, in the relics of a bodice and pyjamas, opened it. Enter Marmaduke Branscombe, Esquire, *alias* the Wolf, bearing a bowl of punch!

"One glass more will do you good," said the old Wolf. "This night work is chilly, so I've brewed a wonderful bowl, and you'll sleep after it like Rip Van Winkle."

"'Pon my life," said the Seraph, "I think we have imbibed almost enough since we began with that confounded glass of Montrachet of Langton's. However, I don't object. It's only twelve o'clock, I see."

It was noon, actually. Raphael wound up his watch. Then the trio sat down to this untimely bowl of punch. It was a miraculous concoction.

"Egad," said Stephen Langton, "it is worth while to have lived in the mysterious East, in order to know how to produce such a divine drink as this. It's Helen's nepenthe, by Zeus Kronion." Stephen usually became classical when ebrious.

"It's not bad stuff," said the Seraph. "I was quite ready to sleep before, but after this, hang me if I shan't go off like a top."

"Well, I thought it would do you both good," said the old Wolf. "The fact is, if you drink sufficiently, your sleep won't hurt you. After this, you'll wake without a headache."

"You must give us the receipt," said Langton; "a good bowl of punch that cures the headache, instead of giving it, would be a blessing."

They finished the punch, strange to say; and Marmaduke Branscombe took friendly leave of them, and in ten minutes they slept.

. . . . . .

Stephen Langton, the youngest and less seasoned, was the first to awake. Notwithstanding the old Wolf's promise, he awoke with a headache—a splitting headache, that seemed capable of splitting a tough planet into infinitesimal fragments. Moreover, he had an awful insatiable thirst—a thirst for a long deep draught of icy water, such as one might get on some green mountain side. And there fell upon him, like a nightmare, a longing to be beside a wayside well not far from Idlechester, where the crystal water perennially flowed from beneath a pointed arch through a gryphon's mouth into a stone ivy-mantled trough, whereon some cleric of old days had inscribed a Greek legend, signifying—"Let all men praise the Lord." And it was utterly dark, pitch dark, dark as Erebus, so that he could not see even the vaguest form. And his memory wholly failed him as to where he was.

That the place was strange, he felt rather than knew. He was in bed—where? His perplexed memory struggled with the past, but could evoke from it nothing definite. He had no recollection of the glass of Montrachet, or the Cellini ball, or the Wolf's punch. Sleep had utterly subjugated him; he could only feel that he had a tremendous headache, an unquenchable thirst, and a nightmare-longing to know where he was.

If you have never been in a position of this kind, reader, let us hope you never may. I have tried it. It is excessively unpleasant.

Stephen Langton got out of bed, and groped about the room. He found a window—drew back the curtains—but all was dark. He threw open the casement, and the cool night air refreshed him. He made a farther exploration, and touched the chill marble of a washing apparatus. A great gulp from the water-caraffe was ecstasy to his parched throat. Then he poured water into the basin, and immersed his head with a mighty splash.

Wasn't it a luxury?

Having repeated this operation, and rubbed his hair dry, he was groping again towards where he assumed his bed to be—of course entirely in the wrong direction—when he heard a voice exclaim—"Who's there?"

"Who the devil are you?" asked Stephen.

"Who am I? Come, that's good! Fellow comes prowling about in *my* room in the middle of the night, and washing at *my* washstand, and then coolly asks me who I am! Now, look here, my friend; I'm not irascible by nature, but I shall shy a boot at your head if you don't explain your conduct."

And Stephen could hear a hand searching for the threatened missile. But he was still so obfuscated that he did not realise the situation.

"Shy away!" he said. "Whoever you are, you'll be rather clever to hit me in the dark. And I'll forgive you, if you'll tell me where I am!"

"Why, confound you! you're in my room, I tell you," exclaimed the Seraph, who verily believed himself at home in Clarges Street. "Who the devil are you, I say?"

By this time Stephen had reached his bed, and comfortably settled himself again.

"Well," he replied, "as you seem so anxious to know, my name's Stephen Langton."

The Seraph, on whom the position of affairs flashed suddenly, burst into laughter.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "we're in the Den, and it's the middle of the night apparently. I'll be hanged if I had not forgotten all about it."

"Faith, so had I. And I've got a most confounded headache, though the old beggar said the punch wouldn't give me one. How do you feel?"

"Oh, I'm all right; rather hungry. He might have left us some matches; but I suppose we must go to sleep again, and wait for daylight." Which they did accordingly.

And when next Stephen Langton awoke, it was broad daylight. The sun was apparently as near the zenith as he ever gets in these latitudes. Stephen jumped out of bed, and looked vainly for a pair of trousers wherein to encase his nether limbs. He was compelled to be content with his velvet breeches—*tempore* Charles II. The Seraph still slept seraphically. They talk of the sleep which a good conscience gives, but nothing can rival the calm repose of the man who has no conscience at all.

Stephen roused his friend. Raphael, when thoroughly himself, remarked—"Well, I never felt sleepier. What time is it?"

Both their watches had stopped.

"Curious!" said the Seraph, "I wound up mine, I know. Ring the bell, old fellow."

Stephen found a bell-pull, and rang loudly. There came no reply.

"I suppose everybody else is asleep too," said the Seraph. "Go and find out, that's a good fellow. You've got some trousers, and I haven't."

"Call these trousers!" said Stephen, disconsolately looking down upon his purple breeches, beyond which protruded legs worthy of Hyperion. "Suppose I meet your sister—or Isola!"

"Well, hang it," reasoned the Seraph, "you *must* do something. You don't seriously expect *me* to walk about in petticoats. I wonder what was done with the clothes I took off."

"I suppose I must venture," said Stephen.

So he went to the door, which, to his amazement, was fastened on the outside.

"The old Wolf's locked us in!" he exclaimed.

"The devil!" cried Raphael, jumping out of bed. "He's been playing us a trick; it's just like him."

They broke open the door, which had been fastened by an outside bolt. Then Stephen, as being the most decently attired, started to explore, and went from room to room, finding nothing. Whereupon he returned, reporting that to all appearance the house was utterly deserted.

"Here's a nice position," said the Seraph. "The old gentleman has played us a pretty trick. But where the deuce are Claudia and Isola, and the servants? I hope there's something in the house to eat, for I am diabolically peckish."

Further search made it obvious that there was not a creature save themselves in the house. Marmaduke and his myrmidons—the Panther—Isola and her neat little ancilla Lotty—were all gone. The clothes which they had taken off to dress for Cellini's masquerade had mysteriously disappeared. And here were Raphael and Stephen, with nothing but their absurd costumes, without a creature to send to Clarges Street or Jermyn Street.

"What shall we do?" asked Stephen Langton, perfectly puzzled.

"Find something to eat and drink first," said the Seraph.

About this there was slight difficulty. The commissariat at the Den was always excellent. A slight search in cupboard and cellaret soon furnished an excellent breakfast.

"The state of my appetite," said the Seraph, "leads me to suppose we have been some time asleep. My highly-respectable uncle must have administered opium in that rascally punch of his. We must have had twenty-four hours' sleep, I fancy."

"How are we to get out of this? Catch a policeman."

"For Heaven's sake, no. Those fellows would take us for thieves perhaps, and carry us off to Bow Street. That won't do. I've cut my precious dress to pieces almost, or I think I might walk to Clarges Street."

Fortune favoured them. There passed along the quiet street a small boy, whistling—"a little vulgar boy," such as swindled Tom Ingoldsby. Stephen tapped cautiously at the window. The youngster came across, and they managed to induce him to come in. In a few minutes he was running away to Clarges Street with a note to Louis. And when the faithful valet and Auguste arrived with linen and clothing, the Seraph and Stephen were astonished to find that, instead of twenty-four, they had actually passed forty-eight hours in bed. Cellini's ball was on Wednesday evening; it was noon on Thursday when they turned in; it was past noon on Saturday when they awoke to find themselves alone in the Wolf's Den.

"By the powers!" said the Seraph, "I never was played so cool a trick. I wonder whether the old gentleman is mad or not?"

"I wonder what he has done with the ladies," said Stephen.

"Egad, yes. I'll tell you what. As he has deserted the Den, we'll just take possession of it. What do you say?"

"A capital notion. I suppose he's sure to return here?"

"I should be sorry to predicate anything at all definite about him. He may have vanished as mysteriously and abruptly as he arrived. *You* found him first—perhaps you'll look for him now."

"Not if I know it. No, the plan is to encamp here, as you propose, and await his return. But couldn't we serve him some trick? Suppose we take lodgers, and admit nobody who can't

play on an instrument. If we got a houseful of trombones and fiddles and drums, I think the old beggar would swear a little."

"Possibly," replied the Seraph. "But, as you and I think of staying here, don't you think *we* might be inclined to swear first? No, that won't do."

"We ought to think upon some way of giving him a Roland for his Oliver," said Stephen meditatively.

"Leave it to me," said the Seraph after a pause. "I've got an idea."

CHAPTER XXVI.

MÉNAGE OU MÉNAGERIE?

"LANGTON," said the Seraph, as they sat over their after-dinner coffee, "do me a favour. You've nothing to do, I know; you're fond of poetic dreaming; go out of town for a couple of days, and then come back to the Wolf's Den."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. Will you do it? The result may amuse you."

"Where the deuce am I to go?"

"Run down to Idlechester and Kingsleat—talk to your aunt and Winifred—make love to Jack Winslow."

"Well," said Stephen, "to oblige you I'll go. When may I return?"

"The day after to-morrow, if you like."

"All right. There's a night mail. I'll tell Auguste to pack a portmanteau, and be off at once."

He did accordingly. He astonished the Half Moon at Idlechester—its ostlers at least—by descending at about two in the morning from the box of the Quicksilver mail, and requiring a bed. When, at about noon, he sat down to breakfast, Jack Winslow came in with the coffee.

"Well, Mr. Stephen," said she, "what mischief has brought you here? We hear all sorts of dreadful tales of your doings in London."

"I am come to see if any young lady in Idlechester will accept my hand and heart and the poor remains of my property," said Stephen. "Now, Jack, don't chaff; tell me the news."

"There's none. The bishop, they say, is to be made Archbishop of York. They do talk of Mr. Walter Branscombe as bishop. Your grandfather is looking very well. So is your aunt Harriet. Mr. Stiggins is mayor this year."

"Well, you're a capital hand at telling the news, Jack. Send me up a bottle of claret, will you? and don't mention to anybody that I'm here."

"Claret!—for breakfast?"

"Slightly. Just look alive, that's a good girl."

"You're not improved by living in London like a gentleman," she said.

"Not likely. Don't gossip, but send me the wine. Best you've got."

The buxom barmaid departed with an ironical curtsey. Stephen, flexible and pliant, had taken very readily to Bordeaux and Burgundy for breakfast. There is nothing that commences the day so divinely as a bottle of light wine. I venerate ale and stout; but I recognise in Anacreon's favourite fluid a stimulus alien from stupefaction—a fine poetic effervescent power—which the strongest ale of Edinburgh or the walled-up malt of Mount Edgecombe and Woolley Hall cannot rival.

As Stephen drank his claret from a tumbler, and smoked a lazy cigar, he reflected on the circumstances which had brought him there. Queer enough they were. Cellini's ball with its adventure; the Wolf's return, and their long sleep; Raphael's resolve of revenge. Stephen wondered at the concatenation of events which had made him almost a Branscombe. What devilry there was among that strange race! What presence of mind in Isola's ready dagger! What a grotesque hoax that sleeping draught of the Wolf's! What did it mean? Was it merely the horse-play of this retired pirate, or had he any sinister intentions in reference to the two girls? He could mean no harm to his own daughter, surely. But what *did* he mean?

Stephen Langton's was a temperament that was both equable and excitable. He had periods of absolute lotos-eating laziness, and periods of the most unquenchable restlessness. If Odysseus had accepted the throne of the *Lotophagoi* he might have felt very much as Stephen did. And he now found himself drawn into a kind of eddy of life—a whirlpool, whence escape seemed impracticable. These Branscombes had *annexed* him. At this moment he could not understand what was to happen in connection with Marmaduke and Raphael. Would there be any tragical development of this Aristophanic comedy? Extremes meet, we know; and the very wild comedy of highly excitable men often ends in horrible tragedy. Even farce ends in tragedy sometimes—*as when a Pope dies.* What says Robert Browning?—

> "Of how some actor played Death on a stage
> With pasteboard crown, sham orb, and tinselled dart,
> And called himself the monarch of the world,
> Then going in the tire-room afterward,
> Because the play was done, to shift himself,
> Got touched upon the sleeve familiarly
> The moment he had shut the closet door
> By Death himself. Thus God might touch a Pope
> At unawares, ask what his baubles mean,
> And whose part he presumed to play just now?"

Stephen Langton, however, having promised not to reappear in the quiet street till the day after to-morrow at earliest, dismissed the Branscombe enigma, and, as well as he could, breakfasted leisurely, and speculated as to what he should do with

himself. The result was pretty much as follows. He paid a visit to the beloved gardens where had been passed the happy hours of his boyish wooing. To his visionary temperament it was a delight to wander on those neglected lawns, under those trees, where at every turn of the garden alleys it seemed that brown-eyed, fresh-cheeked Anne Page, the baby beauty, ought to dance out to meet him. Not there alone did Stephen Langton dream. He wandered, as of old, in the shadow of the great cathedral, and by the sinuous verge of the River Idle. He called back that half-forgotten life of his, with its sordid and its poetic moieties, as if Witney blanket were in some way worked in with cloth of gold. Of course his grandfather's house and the tanyard helped him in this. The old gentleman and the old gentleman's progeny were little altered. When Stephen saw his Aunt Harriet again, he thought of that doleful school of the Sadbrookes', with all its mendicant misery. You cannot destroy the past. Experiences such as those of Stephen Langton's boyhood are indelible. They pass into the imagination; they photograph themselves upon the retina of your mind's eye, Horatio. Stephen found his reminiscences almost painful. *Olim hæc meminisse juvabit* is not invariably true.

Stephen Langton hired a horse and rode to Kingsleat. He turned out of his way to visit the scene of his early boyhood's affliction. To his extreme delight the old place was turned into a farmhouse; in the playground the wheat was green and flourishing; the schoolroom—no great metamorphosis—was now a threshing-floor. Stephen rode into the farmyard, and asked for a glass of cider. Out came a buxom lass, just such as Mr. Barnes' poet of the Dorset Doric describes so naturally—

> "So quick's a bird, so neat's a cat,
> So cheerful in her niater,
> The best o' maidens to come at
> 's a farmer's woldest daeter."

It was just Farmer Greenland's dinner-time; nothing would induce him to let Stephen depart without taking a snack. So, by way of a change from his town life, he found himself eating boiled fowls and bacon, with mighty masses of vegetable matter, in the hospitable society of a stout agriculturist, his stout and smiling wife, and three very nice-looking young females of the race. It was like a dream. Had the Sadbrooke family really dwelt in what was now a jolly farmhouse? Had he been tortured there in his youth? He could not believe it.

"Well," thought Stephen to himself, when, having done justice to good Farmer Greenland's dinner, and taken friendly farewell of his daughters, he rode slowly towards Kingsleat, "I wonder whether it would be a good speculation to marry a farmer's daughter. What would the Seraph say? He'd tell me that she could never be a fit companion for me, never understand me, never enter into society with me. But hang it, after

associating with such wild creatures as Claudia and Isola, anything quiet and commonplace is deucedly refreshing. I wonder where Claudia and Isola are now?"

He rode into Vingsleat. He went first to the public library, but his old acquaintance, Mr. Lonsdale, was away on his annual holiday. Then, having left his horse at the Mitre, he went to the Rectory. Ill-luck pursued him; the Rector and his daughter had just started for Idlechester, to dine at the Bishop's. So he strolled moodily back to the Mitre, and studied the *Idlechester Chronicle* over some seltzer and brandy.

Suddenly, as he looked through the coffee-room window on the deserted street, Dr. Winter was visible descending the hill at his usual swinging pace. Stephen snatched up his hat, and did his best to overtake the doctor. It was no easy business. His accustomed pace, when not in a hurry, was five miles an hour. He was a light weight, sound of wind, with muscles of steel. Stephen's long stride scarcely helped him much. But he did overtake the rapid head-master at last. Then, it was difficult to bring himself under his notice. Dr. Winter was the most absent of men. He had a marvellous faculty of abstraction. He often, striding along on his rapid walks, ignored the existence of most intimate friends. Stephen could only attract his attention by standing so directly in his way that he could pass only by walking through him. But when he had attracted his attention, the Doctor was as courteous as possible.

As they stretched along the towing-path on the margin of Idle, Dr. Winter found out a good deal of his young friend's state of mind. "You are unsettled, Langton. I must give you a little advice. Why don't you decide on a career? Why don't you marry? You are not the man to be happy without occupation."

"If you will find me a wife and a career, sir," said Langton with a slight laugh, "I'll do my best to follow your advice."

"Well, I know something of your adventures. I am not surprised at your reluctance to marry. But surely you can find some one to console you. As to career, I always thought you were likely to do something in literature."

"I cannot find fit topics, or satisfy myself with my treatment. That is what perplexes me. Now, your nephew Humphrey always seems to do perfectly what the public wants."

"Humphrey is a humbug, Mr. Langton. There is nothing *real* about him. He writes successful articles because he is unprincipled and insincere. He can adapt himself to anything, having no definite faith. But stay and dine with me, Mr. Langton. I'll give you some good advice, and better port wine—and then I'll ask you for your advice."—"Mine!"

"Yes. Yours is not unlikely to be good, in reference to a point which I have been all day puzzling myself to determine. So you shall come home with me and give it."

They went, accordingly; and the Doctor and his young friend sat down to an excellent simple dinner. It was a treat to listen

to Dr. Winter's converse. It was always fresh and keen. He looked on life from an original point of view. Moreover, as an experienced schoolmaster, with a faculty for finding out the characteristics of youthful intellects, and a magnetic influence over them, he found a pleasure in studying his guest. He did not disdain the crudities and enthusiasms of youth. He found real pleasure in eliciting Stephen Langton's mental perplexities, and in giving him counsel. He pitied a fine young fellow, born among barbarians, left to educate himself, and inextricably associated with a race of lunatics.

"If only," said Stephen Langton, "I had been fortunate enough to get a rational education; if I had been sent to Kingsleat Grammar School, I should not have been so incapable as I now feel myself. I have never received either affection or culture. A boy wants two helps—a mother and a schoolmaster. I had neither. I was surrounded all through my youth with people whom I could not understand, and who could not understand me, except when I visited Mr. Page; and having had no definite guidance, I am now unable to determine what I ought to do. I am unable to separate myself from the Branscombes, who seem destined to exercise a mysterious influence over me. I cannot resolve on any occupation that will keep me out of mischief. I just pass my time in amusing myself, Dr. Winter—that is all."

"There is no greater mistake," said the Doctor. "Some Frenchman has said"—Dr. Winter read everything—"*La jouissance me parait le but de la vie, et la seule chose utile au monde.* A miserable mistake of the poor idiot's—at least when we connect it with his animal longing for wine and women and the like. Enjoyment, doubtless, is noble when he who enjoys can enjoy nothing ignoble. If I were capable of envy," continued the Doctor, who had got on his hobby, and was riding it with enthusiasm, "I might envy Shakespeare or Kepler, Newton or Sir Humphrey in some supreme moment of imagination, or invention, or discovery. But depend upon it, Mr. Langton, to live for amusement or for mere comfort, is a fatal error—an error that reduces a man to the level of a woman or—a dog."

Stephen laughed at the Doctor's vehemence, and sipped his port—undeniable wine—with the furtive reflection that the "severe Winter" did not wholly disdain comfort, or even luxury.

"I wish you would tell me what to do, Doctor," he said.

"I never attempt impossibilities," responded the head-master quietly. "In your especial case I suspect feminine entanglements" (Stephen blushed); "and I can only tell you to follow the counsels of your own conscience. You know best whether the life you now live satisfies you. I fancy not. You are independent, and can easily break away from it by starting to travel. It must rest with you to resolve whether this would be wise or not."

"*Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor,*" quoted Stephen.

"Ah!" laughed the Doctor, "that bit of classicality is a poor excuse. Better, however, to belong to the miserable half-and-

half, weak-minded, emasculate race who follow that text, than to those bolder mortals who rashly exclaim, *Evil, be thou my good!*"

"I don't know," said Stephen. "I abhor my own mediocrity. I'd rather be an absolute scoundrel, like"—— "Whom?"

"Well, I may say like any of the Branscombes. My friend Raphael is an excellent instance. He is utterly devoid of conscience. He would not murder, perhaps; but he would very coolly kill a man in a duel. He would not steal perhaps, but he would incur any amount of debt that he could not pay. He would not"——

"You call that man your *friend*," interrupted the head-master. "I am ashamed of you."

"Upon my honour, I can't help it," replied Stephen. "I can't get free from him. He fascinates me."

"Pshaw! You have no strength of mind. Travel! Don't waste your time in London upon what that man calls amusement. Get out of his reach if you can't resist his influence. Go abroad—go to Jericho—go to the Antipodes or the South Pole—rather than waste your life as you are now wasting it."

"I'll think of your advice," said Stephen.

"Nobody ever took good advice," said Dr. Winter. "Nobody. I'm an old fool to give it you. If you were a pupil of mine I shouldn't advise you—I should just flog you. You'll get your flogging, my young friend, from harsher hands than mine, and with a sharper implement of castigation."

"I don't doubt it," said Stephen.

"Nobody ever took good advice," repeated the head-master. "Nobody, by Zeus Kronion. Bad advice is winged—winged to the fabulous speed of those steam coaches they are just talking of. Nevertheless, I am about to ask yours. Perhaps your young eyes will see more clearly than my old ones through a mist of difficulty which besets me. You can keep a secret, I am sure."

"I can, and will."

"I am asked to be Bishop of Idlechester. Dr. Bythesea is to be translated to York. The reason why I am asked, so far as I can guess it, is curious. Some years ago I thwarted the Duke of Axminster, who is, you know, an influential member of the Cabinet. He is a singularly haughty man. I have reason to believe that it is by his special desire this offer comes to me. He is reported to have said that I was the only man who had ever opposed him, and that therefore I deserved to be something better than a schoolmaster."

"He reminds me of Charles the Second," said Stephen.

"What is that?"

"It happened at Winchester, I think. King Charles was building a palace there, and brought Nell Gwynne down with him. A certain canon of the cathedral declined to let her stay at his house. The king gave the next vacant bishopric to the good little man who wouldn't receive poor Nell. It was Bishop Ken."

"I have heard the story," said Dr. Winter. "The parallel is

fair. I have no objection to accept the offer on account of the motive. But I doubt whether I am fated to be a bishop. And I know I'm a pretty good schoolmaster."

"A man who is a good schoolmaster is fit for anything," said Stephen.

"That may be. But suppose that I can do more good as a schoolmaster than I could as a bishop."

"Don't you think," urged Stephen, "that it is possible for the best of schoolmasters to be a schoolmaster too long? I fancy all minds that are worth anything are extremely versatile, and ought not to be worked in a perpetual routine. For my own part, I should like to be a great schoolmaster, like yourself, for a few prosperous years—and then to be a bishop—and then to be a general in the army—and then prime minister—and then a great poet or astronomer—and so on."

"Either you are treating the question with irony, my young friend," said the Doctor, delicately cracking a filbert, "or you are striving to show the incompatibility of Episcopus with Ludimagister. To live a dozen lives in one is not possible; happy the man who can live one rightly."

"I thought," said Stephen, "that there was a report that Mr. Branscombe was to be bishop."

"Well, that is another point. It seems to have been an understood thing that the vacancy would be his; and doubtless, if I refuse, the offer will be made to him. I don't like to disappoint him. His claims are far greater than mine; he is on intimate terms with Lord Cheiron; and but for that little affair with the Duke of Axminster, the offer would never have reached me. I don't much like the look of being made a bishop for treading on the tenderest corns of a duke."

"I would accept," said Stephen, briefly and oracularly.

The doctor sat for some time silent, speculating on the change from the head-master's desk to the episcopal throne in that noble old cathedral of Idlechester. At last, after filling for himself a glass of port, which he eyed curiously against the light, examining its beeswing, and then drank with evident satisfaction, Dr. Winter said—

"I will take your advice. Ring for coffee, my young friend, and then I'll write my letter of acceptance. You shall post it yourself, that I may have no chance of altering my mind."

"If I have done nothing else," said Stephen, "I have made a bishop."

The doctor wrote his letter; Stephen took it away with him, and dropped it at the post office as he went to the Mitre. Then he ordered his horse, and rode back to the Half Moon at Idlechester. The embryo prelate's hours were early; Stephen was back at his quarters before midnight. In the parlour, to which he paid a visit, he found his grandfather and one of his uncles, and several of their cronies, smoking and drinking hot spirit and water, with that solemn sedulity which nobly characterises the

great British tradesman. He spent a quarter of an hour with them; then, taking refuge in his own room, he indulged in a meditative monologue on the value of education. It was curious, certainly. These people were of his own blood, but they and he could not get on together with satisfaction. They were manifestly uneasy in his presence, while he was simply bored.

If you are worth anything, O reader—and if you are not, you will hardly have read as far as this—if you are worth anything, I say, you have got a dog. Look at him—into his eyes, as you would look into human eyes that you love. He turns from you; he is unhappy; if you persist, he gets up and walks away. So with the uneducated, undeveloped man. The glance of *nous autres* makes him uncomfortable. His half-unconscious inferiority betrays itself when you look at him—when you speak to him. The man whom educated intelligence has raised above those of his own blood, has this forced upon him with emphasis.

I suppose this—not the canine part of it—proves that everybody ought to be educated. In which case, who is to cart dung and criticise novels? I fear this is Utopian. Starved souls must be worse than starved bodies, however.

The next morning Stephen Langton returned to London. Pleasant was his early drive through the sweet country, on the blushful verge of summer. Yet had the trees their virginal green; yet the larks, blithe spirits, invisible in the ether, made music everywhere; yet the blackbird fluted in the cherry orchards, and the thrush sang anthems in the dense elm leafage; yet lay upon the leafy world the fresh delicious air of spring. The world was young—at least to Stephen so it seemed. As four flying horses whirled him Londonward, he felt as if all the scenes through which he passed had youth and freshness—while he alone was old and weary and stale.

And he made a resolve: and that was, to abandon the stupid empty course of life to which he had become accustomed—to begin a new era—to find something to do if he could not find somebody to love, and to do it resolutely—to make a fresh start, synchronous with Dr. Winter's episcopation.

We shall see how he kept his resolve.

When Stephen had washed from himself the soil of travel, and refreshed himself thereafter, he started for the quiet street. And I will say this for the erratic genius of the Branscombes—he was astonished. As he turned into the street by the end most remote from the house first known to him as Isola's, he saw that something had occurred. The house was altered. Previously quiet and subdued, it seemed to have suddenly thrown out a couple of bow windows. Over the doorway was suspended something strangely like a sign. An inquisitive crowd obstructed not only the pavement, but in some degree the carriage way, and a few intelligent members of the new police were looking on.

Stephen approached. As he did so, it appeared that the sign

swung over the entrance was—a wolf! A wolf—not sculptured, but stuffed, and stuffed by an artist evidently; and looking almost alive. Right above the doorway appeared in large gold letters

THE WOLF'S DEN.

But the windows! There was a room on each side the passage. The fronts of these had been cleared away, and wide bow windows put in. Those windows were filled with cages, and in the cages were all sorts of animals, birds, even reptiles. It was a grotesque menagerie. Where in the world Raphael Branscombe could, in two days, have collected such a strange mixture of creatures—chimpanzee and lynx, boa-constrictor and vulture, Australian magpie and Esquimaux dog—was an enigma to Stephen Langton.

"Well," he quietly ejaculated, "these Branscombes are all mad together."

The scene within was even more remarkable. Both walls of the passage had been removed, and the two front rooms made into a good-sized shop. When he entered, Stephen was confronted by an odd figure—a dwarf, very short, very stout, very hairy about the face, and looking altogether almost inhuman. This grotesque creature was the guardian of a motley collection—there were lions, tigers, panthers, ostriches, kangaroos, wombats; it was a wonder how so many animals could be packed in their cages into so small a space.

Stephen Langton certainly *was* surprised.

He inquired for Mr. Raphael Branscombe. That gentleman was entirely unknown. The grotesque dwarf, whose English was strangely alloyed by some *patois* to Stephen utterly alien, maintained entire ignorance of the Seraph. But when Stephen's state of wonderment had lasted long enough, a door at the back suddenly opened, and Raphael appeared for a moment, beckoning; and Stephen, of course, followed him. He was led to a small back room on the first floor, with a couple of chairs in it, and a great number of small monkeys in cages.

"Have a cigar, old boy," said the Seraph; "you'll never stand the stench if you don't smoke."

Stephen obeyed. Then he said—

"What the deuce does all this mean?"

"Surprised, eh?" asked the Seraph.

"Rather, certainly."

"Well, if *you* are surprised, how will the old Wolf feel when he comes back?"

"Astounded, I should think. But how in the world have you managed the affair? Where did you get all these infernal beasts?"

"From an acquaintance of mine in Ratcliffe Highway—a fellow with a big collection, who was willing enough to bring them all here for a trifle. Oddly enough, the fellow's name's Wolf. By Heaven, what a row there'll be when the respectable Mr. Marmaduke Branscombe appears!"

"Do you mean to wait in this vile *entourage* of effluvia till that happens?"

"I don't know what else to do. I would not miss his advent for a thousand pounds."

"Couldn't we take lodgings just opposite?" suggested Stephen. "That's what Theodore Hook did in Berners Street."

"Well, that's a good notion," replied the Seraph. "Suppose you go across and negotiate? They are nearly all lodging-houses in this street." This little affair was soon arranged.

"You must take care of yourself, Wolf," said the Seraph to the dwarf. "The old gentleman will come back in a towering rage, and want to murder you."

"Let him try," snarled the troglodyte, glaring fiercely.

Raphael and Stephen, established in the first floor of the opposite house, watched by turns for the arrival of Marmaduke Branscombe. Several days passed, and they did not venture to leave their quarters, for fear of missing him. Their patience was rewarded at length.

A travelling carriage with four horses pulled up in front of the Wolf's Den at about one o'clock. The two friends were just at luncheon, which meal they conducted close to a window, so as to command the situation.

"Here he is at last!" ejaculated the Seraph. There he was.

The postilions had thrown the horses on their haunches, for Marmaduke had accustomed them to vigorous velocity. One of his myrmidons, descending from the front seat, opened the carriage door. Out came the old pirate, and looked up at the house, and was silent. There's a Yankee story of poor President Lincoln somewhat to this effect:—A profane ruffian, imaginative in his oaths, suddenly got into some unprecedented fix. An expectant audience surrounded him, anticipating boundless blasphemy. But he said no word; he could not do justice to the subject.

So with the old Wolf. So thoroughly flabbergasted was he, that his fair companions, Isola and Claudia, had both reached the pavement before he had got together voice enough for a remark.

"Why, papa?"—"Why, uncle!" cried a couple of charming voices. The windows of the opposite first floor were open, and their silver surprise travelled easily across.

"By Jove, this *is* rich," said Stephen Langton.

Choleric was the old Wolf as he entered the wild beast shop. Loud and deep was his voice as he exclaimed—

"What does this mean?"

The dwarf came forward, and in a *patois* which I cannot reproduce, but which was quite intelligible to Marmaduke Branscombe, to whom irregular languages were professionally familiar, inquired what he could do for him. The two ladies had followed the old Wolf into the shop, and were daintily holding their dainty dresses, and pressing perfumed kerchiefs to their insulted nostrils.

"This is MY house!" exclaimed Marmaduke Branscombe with violent ferocity. "Who are you?"

"My name is Wolf," replied the dwarf volubly. "I keep a menagerie. What can I sell you? This is the finest chimpanzee in Europe—almost as handsome as a man; if he could talk he would be better than some men. That panther—the ladies are looking at that panther. Ah! she is a beautiful creature—*so* tame, but she hates men; she likes ladies, pretty ladies. She killed a boy once, but don't say anything about it, please. She is cheap. I can sell her for a hundred pounds. She would defend you, Senora," he said, looking at the panther's namesake.

"*Stop this foolery!*" thundered Marmaduke. "What the devil is the meaning of my house being turned into this confounded bear-garden? You're a robber and a scoundrel. I've a great mind to murder you." With which utterance the fierce old man advanced towards the dwarf menagerie-keeper in a threatening attitude. The troglodyte opened wide eyes, and a wider mouth, and drew from his breast a pistol. Things looked serious. Practical jokes too often end seriously.

"Papa!" exclaimed the argent voice of Isola, "didn't you tell us you had played Raphael a trick? You may be sure he has played you this trick in return."

The old Wolf acquired sudden enlightenment; and at this point the two conspirators entered the shop, and accosted the ladies with courteous *empressement*.

Marmaduke Branscombe burst into prodigious laughter.

"You're too much for me, my boy," he said to the Seraph. "*You're* a Branscombe. By Heaven, I almost thought I was mad, or dreaming; but now, as you have turned my house upside down, perhaps you'll tell me where I'm to go?"

"Come to Clarges Street," said the Seraph. "There's plenty of room for you there; but won't you take a chimpanzee or a panther with you?"

They went on to Clarges Street, and were soon comfortably established there.

"Pray," said Raphael to his sister, "what mischief have you been doing or plotting since you ran away?"

"We have only been to Brighton," she replied. "It was a whim of my uncle's, just to play you a trick. He gave you something to make you sleep."

"Thank you for the information," said the Seraph. "I fancy we found that out for ourselves some time ago."

"Well," laughed Isola, "I think you had very much the best of it. Papa won't try to play any more tricks upon *you* for a day or two."

"No," growled the Wolf, taking his pipe from his mouth; "I'll be hanged if I do! Perhaps you'll tell me what I'm to do with that house, now you've turned it into a den of lions?"

"Go and live there, papa, like Daniel," said Isola.

"I think the fellow I've put in will be a capital tenant," said the Seraph; "and a shop of that kind is rather wanted in the neighbourhood. Better let him stay."

I will not pretend to record the evening reflections of the Wolf or his nephew; each was happy in the grotesque and eccentric fashion of the Branscombes. Not so either Claudia or Isola: I rather fancy that Marmaduke's pretty daughter was pining to be loved. With all her wild spirits and gay slang, the little beauty was dissatisfied with life. What did she want, I wonder? She had money beyond limit. What will not money procure?

Claudia had met Sir Arthur Willesden at Brighton, and continued her flirtation. Matters indeed were beginning to get serious. She had succeeded in convincing him that she meant something; he, having had that conviction thrust through his taurine brow, pushed with prodigious obstinacy against all obstacles. Claudia felt in danger.

Did she like Sir Arthur? Was he the strong man with the governing hand whom her fancy painted him? Did he love her? Could they possibly assimilate in tastes and occupations? The poor Panther perplexed herself perpetually with endless questionings of this and other kinds. She found no answers. She only found that he laid persistent siege to her—that he looked on her as his property—that he would not leave her alone.

How often—ah, how often—she sorrowed over the poetic boy whose love she had thrown away!

As to Stephen, when he separated that evening from his friends, and shut himself up in his Jermyn Street sanctuary, he became seriously meditative. What a gulf was fixed between the calm wisdom of Dr. Winter and the mad freaks of this wild race of Branscombe! Well, he was a boy yet, almost; he would separate himself from these people; he would try another life—perhaps even another love. Oh, delicious thought! Where dwelt the beautiful creature who would give him the virgin touch of her lip, the virgin blush of her heart? Surely he was not doomed to loneliness because his truth had been foiled by frailty and falsehood—surely life had its treasure awaiting him yet!

But where to seek?—No, mere search would be futile. He must qualify himself for love by work; he was empty and useless now—a mere votary of pleasure—a being unlovable by any woman whose love was worth possession. What should he do to attain manhood of mind? How should he conquer his virility? To be like Humphrey, of some sordid profession, seemed disgusting to him; while he had modesty enough to believe that, though he longed to be a poet, he did not possess the vision and the faculty divine; yet to think, to observe, to write—to describe, if unable to create—this was the thirst of his soul. He would travel. It seemed to him, as it has seemed to thousands, that if he sought he must find. At the very least, if the love for which he pined were impossible, inachievable, and if to be a poet were utterly beyond him, he might turn travel to some serious literary import.

In the adyta of his heart he believed in the possibility of a new, enthralling, absorbing love—a love beside which his boy-penchant for sweet Anne Page and his fantastic flirtation with

the Panther would be like sepia sketches in the presence of a picture painted by Titian in his ninetieth year. Why his ninetieth? Because the love of colour grows with age. So Stephen Langton saw in the far-distance a delicious creature whom he first created and afterwards loved—a creature to madden poets, to cause the blood of Iliads, the wandering of Odysseus, the ebrious joy of Anacreontics. And he felt the fullest faith that his guess must have successful issue—little knowing that to chase such a phantom of the imagination is like attempting to reach the horizon, which keeps just as far ahead of the man who gallops as of the man who loiters.

Better to stay at home and wait till that which you long for descends upon you with sudden sweetness. Better to be calm and patient, and surely the very strength of your thirst will make the fountain flow. There are some things which any man—any vulgar man indeed—may gain. Gold is one: he has only to enter upon a trade, to work from sunrise to sunset, to be perfectly honest and perfectly unscrupulous; he will die a millionaire. Fame is another; if it be literary fame he requires, let him only write books which are slightly stupid and singularly religious; let him combine Tupper with A. K. H. B., infusing a slight touch of Spurgeon-and-water; he will be famous, and *Good Words* and the *Record* will praise him. But love is another affair, thank God. It is not a thing to be gained by utter abnegation of manhood—like money and renown.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MORFILL'S APPOINTMENT.

I HOPE I have not been hard upon Humphrey Morfill. He had one great object in life—his own advancement. He was marvellous in perspicacity and manipulation. He could see at a glance what was to be done, and could do it. This is a most valuable faculty. He made no mistakes. He never longed for the impossible. He saw in the world an arena where few men were as strong as himself, and he threw himself into it to win what prizes were open to him. And he won prizes. He had many qualifications. Beyond his native ability, which was unusually great, and the power of which he could exactly estimate, he had his wife's fortune and his uncle's position. For Dr. Winter was Bishop-designate of Idlechester.

And it so happened that the severe and conscientious headmaster who would not, after the elopement, have lifted a finger to aid the nephew who had acted with dishonour, was the means of his advancement. The Duke of Axminster being the Dionysius of Kingsleat, had naturally a Dionysian ear. The Duke was the proudest of men, but he was also a gentleman. He was angry beyond expression when Kingsleat rebelled against his parlia-

mentary influence. He was angrier still when, desiring to expel Mr. Lonsdale from his position at the Kingsleat library, he found an obscure schoolmaster a man who not only resisted his ducal will, but drank his choicest claret, and then wrote a Greek epigram upon him. But in time the Duke grew calm, and saw the injustice of his own desires. He saw that if he had ousted from the librarianship the blameless Lonsdale, he should have regretted it to the end of his ducal days. He felt truly grateful to Dr. Winter for the resolute resistance which had prevented him from making a fool of himself. He recognised in the obstinate head-master, who treated a Duke of Axminster with contempt, a man of unusual calibre. Whence it happened that one day, at a Cabinet Council, Cheiron mentioning that the Archbishop of York was just dead, and that he thought of promoting Bishop Bythesea, the Duke immediately thought, "What a capital bishop Winter would make in these days when most bishops are old women!"

And as Axminster was a man to whom the First Minister would not think of refusing such a mere trifle as the disposal of a bishopric, Dr. Winter got the offer. And Stephen Langton coerced him to accept it.

Now the Dionysian ear had brought to the Duke the information that Dr. Winter had a nephew—a very promising young man. Of the elopement also rumour had reached him; but it was not likely to occur to him that any man would quarrel with his nephew for running away with two or three thousand a-year. That is virtue too severe. So, having made up his mind to do what he could for Dr. Winter, with that facile generosity which pertains to great princes who cannot feel the cost of anything, he put Morfill on his list for an appointment. Whence it happened that the young man was diverted from that high road to the Woolsack which he had chosen, by an offer of a temporary appointment abroad, which would bring him both reputation and money, and at the termination whereof the Government would, of course, provide him with other remunerative occupation. Finding that it would rather advance than retard him in his career, Humphrey Morfill accepted.

This keen-sighted man did not understand women—least of all his wife. Balzac has remarked that even the Creator of women cannot understand them; perhaps he is right. Humphrey, when he persuaded Anne Page to elope with him, did it just as he would have made a strong move in the game of chess. He did not trouble himself to analyse the subtle complex motives at work even in that childish breast to induce her to go with him. He did not look into the future, with any vague doubt as to whether the girl who ran away to marriage might hereafter wish to run away from marriage. Humphrey had one quality, which was a source of weakness as well as strength—confidence in himself. This strengthened him when he had to enter the arena of intellectual strife; but it weakened him when dealing with a woman. He could not believe that a woman would betray *him*.

As most of Anne's intercourse with the Seraph occurred during her visits to Claudia in Clarges Street, Humphrey, absorbed in business, knew nothing of it. But even her more daring escapades did not come to his cognisance. He heard nothing of the late nights out which had coincided with his absence on affairs. The servants pitied the pretty childish Mrs. Morfill, and did not dream of informing against her. They disliked their master, whose reserve and inflexibility were not intended for servile popularity. Hence happened it that he heard nothing of the improprieties to which the Seraph had cruelly forced his poor little victim, and fully believed that she was as innocent a creature as when he stole her from Kingsleat Rectory. His high opinion of himself made him blind to the possibilities which lay around him. He looked on his wife as a child still; and, when he had accepted an appointment which took him at once to Constantinople, he announced to his wife, with the utmost coolness, his intention of going and taking her with him.

Women in love are wonderful in their power of dissimulation. She received the announcement with as much coolness apparently as he gave it with. But the thought of Raphael conferred upon her this factitious strength. She believed in the power of the man whom she loved to save her from exile.

Humphrey Morfill, having quietly one evening told her his intentions, went out to meet some friends. He spent very few evenings at home. He wasted no time, and made even his trifling dissipations useful.

When he was gone, poor little Anne took flight to her own room and threw herself with utter abandonment upon a couch, burying her sweet brown-tressed head in her tiny white hands, and sobbing without restraint.

"How cruel he is!" she muttered. "How wicked he is! Why did he take me away from Kingsleat? He doesn't love me, I know—and I *hate* him. Yes; I do. I won't go to Constantinople. I'd rather kill myself." And so on—*ad libitum.*

And, as she lay there, crushed into strange cares, thinking wild thoughts, sobbing mad resolves—exquisitely beautiful so far as you could see any part of her—with brown dishevelled hair over plump white shoulders, and white hands clenching themselves pink—some one catches her; some one had entered the room quietly, and closed the door, and now stood quietly, a spectator of her childish grief, with a smile of amusement on his lip. Presently he stepped forward, raised her suddenly in his strong arms from the couch, and, seating himself there, looked laughingly into her tearful and astonished face.

"What is the matter with my little pet?" asked Raphael Branscombe, and then kissed her on the eyelids.

She told him her grief.

"Well, child, you'll have a very nice trip. Constantinople is a charming place. Perhaps I may come and see you there."

First she tried, in her indignation, to escape from the grasp of

steel which held her. This was vain; so she nestled closer to him, and whispered—"*I'm not going.*"

"Wives must obey their husbands," he said. "I don't encourage rebellion. You'll enjoy it, my darling."

"I shall come to you," she said with serious emphasis.

"Amusing!" thought the Seraph. "The little girl's *entêtée.* What's to be done with her?"

"O Raphael!" she exclaimed, suddenly slipping from between his arms and gliding to the floor at his feet, "I cannot leave you. I cannot—I cannot—I cannot. I love you."

She iterated and reiterated these phrases with inexhaustible pertinacity. Raphael raised her from the ground, and walked up and down the room in reflective mood. At last he said—

"My dear child, you are such a mere girl that I doubt whether you know your own mind."

"Yes; I do, I do, I do," she interrupted eagerly.

"Well, you may, child. But you don't know the result of what you ask. Now, wait a minute, and calm yourself a moment, and think."

He passed a very steady hand over her flushed forehead, as if to tranquillise her by some magnetism of touch.

"If you leave your husband," he said, "you throw away your life. You will have a few weeks or months of delight with me—weeks most likely—and then you will die, or wish to die. Can you throw away a comfortable home for a month or two of pleasure? It is absurd, child. It is because I like you, and pity you, that I tell you so."

"*I shall come to you,*" she repeated.

"By Jove," thought the Seraph to himself, "what a singularly moral man I am, and didn't know it! If I were to go into the Chandos to-night, and tell the fellows that the prettiest woman in London (bar one) had offered to run away with me, and I had declined, I wonder who would believe it? 'Pon my life, though, I should like to save this little thing. She's such a young bird. What the devil shall I do?"

Thus soliloquised the Seraph in the bed-chamber which should have been sacred to Humphrey Morfill, while that learned gentleman was supping with some distinguished barristers, and that gentleman's charming little wife was awaiting the Seraph's decision with anxiety as terrible as that of Esther the Queen in the inner court of the king's house when she had come unbidden into the presence of Ahasuerus.

"Well," he said at last, "you must have your way, I suppose. Give me due notice of Morfill's movements. If you are quite determined to ruin yourself, why should I interfere? But you *can't* mean it."

"I do mean it," she said. "I cannot live with that man; I despise him; I hate him. You have made me love you—you know you have. Raphael, you must not desert me."

This little Anne, for the first time in her life, had a will of her

own. Never before, I suppose, had she felt the real passion of love. For Stephen Langton it was only a child's fancy; and she had run away with Humphrey Morfill from a mere wish to escape Claudia's tyranny; but the Seraph had really awakened her sleeping heart—had created a woman where there was but a girl before—had lighted the inextinguishable volcano which exists beneath the iciest and calmest maidenhood.

He was in no degree loth to take the consequences, only he really pitied the little girl. He had not realised the fact that she was more than a child. He would have had no compunction in taking away a queenlier creature, but he had been merely playing with Anne, whom he regarded as a baby and toy. However, he now discovered that he was wrong—that Lilliput may have its Cleopatra. So, like the highly practical man that he had always been, he reflected on the details of the affair. Morfill might want to fight him—he didn't care about that; or might go to law—well, the Branscombes could afford a few thousands now. He should by and by, of course, get tired of the little runaway, and then he must find her a place where she could live in comfortable seclusion. All these matters passed rapidly yet lucidly through his mind during the few moments in which he kept Mrs. Morfill in suspense. One feeling which he had was pleasure at annoying Morfill, alloyed, however, by the impression that the young lawyer would care little about his wife so long as he kept his wife's money. However, that couldn't be helped; he had commenced the adventure, and must carry it to its issue, and he accordingly did not leave Mrs. Morfill until he had arranged to take her away from her husband's house about an hour before the time that should be fixed for that husband's departure. The prospect of the adventure delighted the Seraph. Nothing did he so thoroughly enjoy as a "neat thing" of this sort.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

STEPHEN LANGTON'S GUEST.

"WHO seeks, shall find." I like the aphorism. It is highly encouraging. It is, in some cases perhaps, partially true. The knight-errant may get his adventure, the merchant venturer his gold, coined hatred, the coquette her flirtation. Ay, there may even come to the barrister the woolsack, and to the doctor the *accouchement* of a princess. But anything noble—no. Nelson exclaimed, "I wish I could catch Bonaparte *on a wind!*" Why, if the passionate sea-chivalry of England, as embodied and crystallised in our Nelson, had caught the conquering greed of France, the mighty Moloch, Napoleon, *on a wind*, what a sublime crisis it would have been! Who doubts for the millionth of a moment how it would have ended? Who cannot conjure up a vision of the pale passionate face of the avenging admiral running

the *Victory* alongside General Bonaparte's ship? There would have been no Waterloo. But the glory was reserved for one of calmer temper than the victor of Trafalgar. With a longing as extreme as Nelson's to meet Bonaparte on the sea, longed Stephen for love. Perchance, had he been an admiral, had there been war, had there been "the meanest man of men," as Wordsworth well calls Napoleon, to thwart in his career of fiend, Stephen would have longed to fight. But now he longed for true love. Blame him not. "Were there more Emmas, there would be more Nelsons." The man who can love well in peace, can fight well when there is war.

Stephen Langton went down to the Chandos to dine on the very evening that the Seraph had devoted to Mrs. Morfill. The first man he saw was Phil Palliser—better known among his cronies as Seagull Palliser. Phil was the most resolute of yachtsmen. He kept a schooner yacht called the *Seagull*, at Cowes, and he devoted himself to that yacht. His relations, a good family, were anxious that he should make a figure in the world, and he had the materials; he had money and he had brains; but Phil had fallen in love with his yacht, and it was obvious that nothing short of shipwreck would cure him. Indeed, I doubt if an ordinary shipwreck would have had that effect. Possibly, if he had been cast away in the very centre of the Pacific, and compelled to cast lots with his comrades who should eat whom, Seagull Palliser would have given up yachting. I doubt if anything else would have cured him. He and Stephen chancing to be without other acquaintances, dined *tête-à-tête*. Of course, over the claret, they became frightfully confidential; and Langton told Palliser that he was weary of his unoccupied life, that he couldn't stand it any longer, that he meant to travel in search of a career.

"Ah," said Phil, "I like that. Travel in search of a career! Tell you what, old boy, I've got a career—which is, to travel."

Stephen answered not, but sipped his wine.

"Look here," resumed Palliser, "I'm off on a yachting trip—going to the Mediterranean. Can't matter to *you* where you go. Better go with me."

"When are you off?" asked Stephen.

"When you like. To-morrow, if you like. I've been waiting for a fellow to go with. Fellows won't leave London this time of year, confounded fools."

"It would suit me very well," said Stephen. "To-morrow is rather sharp, but I shall be quite ready by the day after."

"Give us your hand, old boy," said Seagull Palliser. "Like your style, I do. Tell you what, I'll go down to-morrow morning—no, by Jove, I'll catch the Southampton mail to-night—heaps of time. You come on to Cowes and bring your traps as soon as you're ready. That do?"—"Perfectly."

Hence was it that Stephen Langton, having taken leave of his friends among the Branscombes—and I assure you he did not forget Isola—found himself, with his luggage, and his servant Auguste Lancel, on board the clipping schooner-yacht *Seagull*,

within forty-eight hours of the colloquy briefly recorded above. And Phil Palliser was not the man to let the grass grow under his feet—assuming that to be a marine possibility. It may be asked, how in the world could Stephen expect, by joining an enthusiastic yachtsman, to realise his dream? Was he going in for a mermaid? Well, in the first place, Stephen had resolved to travel, and rather superstitiously jumped at the first offer. And, secondly, it is to be observed that yachtsmen occasionally go ashore, and have been known to make havoc among feminine susceptibilities under such circumstances. I am not going to follow Seagull Palliser and Stephen Langton through all their adventures in the Midland Sea. One adventure shall suffice. Stephen was lying in the stern smoking, with no companion save Palliser's big Newfoundland dog, an animal that had taken a great fancy to him. As he lay in one of those satisfied dreamy moods which often come to the poetic temperament, his eyes half closed from very weariness of the intense blue of sea and sky, it seemed to him that he saw—very far off—Raphael Branscombe pacing the sea-shore with a woman indescribably beautiful, though of melancholy beauty. Not Anne Page, certainly; a creature of stranger and more poetic charm. The vivid fancy was interrupted by a clamour of voices; he opened his eyes and sprang to his feet, and found that the sky was suddenly overclouded, that a storm had arisen; he heard Phil Palliser exclaim to the clever young mariner who managed his yacht—"Where are we?"

"Off Monte Cristo, sir."

"Is there any harbourage, do you know?"

"I've heard it's pretty fair, sir. We'd better try it. With this wind we can't make Elba."

So the *Seagull* ran into the harbour of the little islet of Monte Cristo, nine miles in circuit, concerning which our beloved entertainer, Alexandre Dumas, has built up so deliciously absurd a romance. And the next day Langton and Palliser explored the island. They found the ruins of a convent; many caverns; a populous colony of wild goats. I need hardly say that they found no treasures, nor even anybody to offer them the enchanted hachish. Wherefore, when the gale had subsided, they thought they would visit the birthplace of Napoleon, and evening saw the *Seagull* at anchor in the bay of Ajaccio.

Life is made up of coincidences—especially the life of a man like Stephen Langton. When the beautiful *Seagull* ran into that noble gulf where lie the Bloody Islands, his heart throbbed as he looked upon the lofty mountains which he had never beheld before. Their forms seemed familiar to him. Had he beheld them in dreams? When they ran ashore—when they stood in the chief street, named after Napoleon, and ornamented by an avenue of orange-trees—when they wandered through the Place du Diamant, overlooking the sapphire waters of the bay—Stephen felt in his breast a fluttering half-prescient warning of something strange to come. Eventide arrived; after an excellent Corsican dinner

the two yachtsmen loitered on the Place, among a crowd of promenaders, the women wearing the black faldetta, suggestive of mystery and intrigue, while a military band played lively airs. There came upon Stephen the conviction—"*I have some one to meet in this place.*" As he stood that night on the seawall, inhaling the delicious breath of the wooing west, watching the reflex of the Milky Way and the Evening Star (star of love) in the phosphorescent waters of the gulf, watching point after point of light which indicated the *fanali* on point after point of land, listening to the joyous music and the soft susurrus of the loitering crowds, Stephen was so impressed by his belief that he turned abruptly to Seagull Palliser and said—"I shall have an adventure here."

"Run away with a little Corsican, I suppose. Better not. *Vendetta*, you know. Awkward. However, if you want to take something nice away in the yacht, she's at your service."

"I don't contemplate any particular escapade of that kind," said Stephen quietly; "but I have a conviction that something will happen to me here. I'm rather a queer fish, you know, Palliser. I've often had such presentiments, and they're always fulfilled. My impression is that there is some one in this town of Ajaccio who wants to see me—whom I *must* see."

"All right, old boy. I don't quite understand it; but I'll stick to you like a brick."

"You're in no particular hurry to move, are you?" asked Stephen.

"Not a bit. Stay here a month if you like. Buy relics of old Bony. It seems a jolly island, and the fish that plump little landlady gave us for dinner were as fresh as herrings."

"They weren't herrings, though," said Stephen, "and they were uncommonly nice; but the wine was awfully strong. But I feel so certain, Phil, that something's going to happen here, that I should like to stay here a few days and see."

"If we stay a few days, something will happen—namely, I shall fall in love. That quaint black picturesque dress the women wear, and the way they manage their dark flashing eyes, have nearly done for me already. The worst of it is, I can't talk Italian a bit."

"Never mind. I can, and so can Auguste. We'll help you."

"Don't like making love through an interpreter," said Seagull Palliser. "Rather likely to get sold. Interpreter may let you in, and keep the fun for himself."

The result of this confabulation was that Langton and Palliser amused themselves by thoroughly exploring Ajaccio and its neighbourhood. They visited the Casa Bonaparte, in the Place Letitia, where dwelt Carlo Maria Bonaparte, the struggling advocate. At the age of eighteen, this young lawyer, with a barrister's improvidence, married Letitia Ramolino, the beauty of Corsica, fourteen years old. Those were the days of the Corsican republic, when Pasquale Paoli, immortal patriot, was defending his native island against the aggressive and tyrannous French, to whom

Genoa had ceded the island. Thirty years later, after a weary struggle, Corsica placed itself under the protection of England, and Sir Gilbert Elliot was appointed governor; but in 1796 we deserted it in a wonderful hurry, at the first appearance of a couple of French generals, sent over by Napoleon in the flush of Italian conquest. I suppose William Pitt did not think the romantic islet worth a fight.

Well, in 1764, young Carlo Bonaparte, newly married to the exquisite little Letitia Ramolino, was Paoli's secretary, and a very fiery opponent of the French. He died at Paris, at the early age of thirty-nine, leaving eight children to the care of his young widow. Often had Carlo Bonaparte, who spent all that he earned, been troubled for the future of those eight children; and lo, Napoleon conquered half a world, and Joseph and Jerome and Louis were kings, and Caroline a queen, and Pauline and Eliza princesses. What a superfluous wealth of royalty cradled in the little house of the Corsican lawyer! And Napoleon made his uncle a cardinal, and would have made Lucian a king if that unambitious Bonaparte had not resolutely declined the doubtful glory of a throne. Stephen Langton heartily approved Lucian's determination. Bad enough to be a king in any case, he thought, but to be a sub-king to a Napoleon must have been an awful business.

The two yachtsmen wandered through the vicinity of Ajaccio, and ate grapes and almonds and figs in the pleasant orchards, and admired the beautiful peasant girls carrying fruit-baskets and wine jars on their low-crowned straw-hats. Then they went out to see the anchovy-fishing off the Bloody Islands, and occasionally varied their amusement by a cruise as far as Cape Corso in the *Seagull*. But no adventure came to Stephen Langton, who quietly submitted to the chaff which his comrade now and then inflicted on him in reference to his anticipation. Nor had Palliser, though greatly smitten by the quaint beauty of the Corsican damsels, succeeded in the initiation of any erotic enterprise. His tongue had a stubborn incapacity for adapting itself to any language but its own sibilant guttural English. So, with the most adventurous intentions in the world, poor Seagull Palliser could make no way. One delicious morning they went out immediately after breakfast to watch the arrival of the Marseilles steamer. On the quay Stephen took special notice of a group of three persons. One was a noble old Corsican, of stately presence, but with the very gleam of vendetta in his eye. With him was a creature exquisitely beautiful, but smitten with the pallor of hope deferred. And the third person being Marc Antonio, the fisherman, I need not say who were the other twain. Ah, it was not the first time by many that the swift *Fantasia* had made vain voyage to Ajaccio to meet the steamer from Marseilles. Angelo Montalti knew full well that it was vain, but he would not thwart poor Fiordilisa's desires; and so Marc Antonio took the boat round every week, and more than once the deserted wife had voyaged in it. Her story was known through Corsica. The

wild islanders, when they saw her perfect pallid beauty, muttered menaces against the false Englishman. But she, in whom love had begotten trust, believed that something terrible had happened to him—that he had been stricken down by disease or accident—otherwise she felt full faith that he would have returned to her. And she had tragic visions of him whom she loved, lying delirious in hospitals, lying shattered and shapeless at the foot of mighty cliffs, lying shot through the heart in a duel. Anything rather than false. The idea of Raphael Branscombe's falsehood left no mark upon the maiden purity of the mirror of her mind, though all Corsica had accepted it, and melancholy dirge-like ballads, and fiercer rhapsodies, prophesying vendetta, were heard night after night in every locanda.

Marc Antonio, seeing strangers (*nigri cygni*) in Ajaccio, had soon made out that they were countrymen of Raphael Branscombe—"Raffaelle Birbone," as he was commonly called. So he found out Auguste, Stephen's valet, and from him got a vague notion that Fiordilisa's betrayer was not unknown to Auguste's master. It was very vague and confused, for the Frenchified Italian of the valet, and the soft flat Corsican dialect of the fisherman, had few points of contact. But his report of the colloquy excited the anxious eager curiosity of the poor broken Lily of Isola Rossa; and so, when the bustle of the Marseilles boat was over, and the yachtsmen had sauntered away to smoke upon the seawall, where seldom came a single saunterer save themselves all through the sultry summer day, they were suddenly encountered by Angelo Montalti and his granddaughter, and Fiordilisa exclaimed to Stephen, in an abrupt, piteous, agitated voice—

"You are English, señor?"

It took her a long time to make him understand that it was Raphael for whom she inquired so eagerly; and when he did understand it, he knew not what to say. But by degrees he said enough to show her that her husband was alive and well, and her eyes brightened, and her pale cheeks flushed at the good news. And then came reflection and action.

"Why does he not come? Why does he not even write? O Raffaelle!" Thus *sotto voce* she exclaimed, and would have suddenly fallen to the ground if Angelo's arm had not caught her round the waist at the very moment.

The keen eye of the old man had watched all the interview. Angelo Montalti could detect in every tone of Stephen Langton's voice the natural reluctance to say too much in these critical circumstances. Stephen, of course, was wholly ignorant of Raphael's position in reference to Fiordilisa, and fearing to injure his friend, told as little about him as possible. Angelo noted this, and knew its meaning; his foregone conclusions were justified; he felt at his breast for that ivory-hafted poniard which he had deftly prepared for the inevitable vendetta.

"She will die soon," he muttered to himself, "and then!"

Raphael was very cool; but the glance of that old Corsican's

eye at that moment might have made even *him* nervous. Fiordilisa was tenderly conveyed by her grandfather and Marc Antonio to their locanda. Hitherto she had felt a certainty that her beloved Raphael was prevented from reaching her or communicating with her by some dire disaster; but now this belief of hers was annihilated by the testimony of one who professed to know him well, to be his friend. *Where* was he then? *Why*—oh! why did he not come to her? These unanswerable questions seemed to burn themselves into her brain, to stab her loving heart with wounds of wonder.

"*Why?—Why?*" she ejaculated, as she lay upon her bed in the locanda, with her left hand, white as a lily, nervously clutching at the seat of her fluttering heart, upon which had suddenly come a sharp inexplicable anguish. Her eyes were set in a straining stare as if she fain would pierce the leagues of restless misty foam which lay between herself and Raphael, and know for herself where indeed he was—*why* he had left her lonely. But Angelo Montalti, having left her in female care, returned to ask further questions of Stephen, who was still walking on the seawall with Palliser in rather a disturbed state of mind.

"Queer coincidence!" said Seagull Palliser to Stephen. "What *is* all this about Branscombe?"

"I hardly understand," replied Stephen. "So far as I can make it out, that pretty creature supposes herself to be his wife. It seems to me hardly probable. He is very careless of what he does when women are concerned; but I can't fancy marriage in his line."

"Odd business. Your presentiment comes true, after all—not in a very pleasant way, though. Rather a bore to have to extenuate Branscombe's escapades. Pretty girl for yourself might have been worth a little trouble. Hadn't we better bolt?"

"No," said Stephen. "I don't like the affair; but it is clear that Branscombe is in some way implicated, and I must do what I can, both for him and the girl."

"Beautiful girl, by Jove!" said Palliser. "Never liked Branscombe—fellow always so high and mighty—seems to think you're nobody. My family's as good as his any day. Besides, he's *too* fast. I don't mind a man's being moderately fast—but, hang it, Branscombe don't stop at anything. I call him too fast. He hastn't got any heart, I don't think."

"Heart!" ejaculated Stephen, who had scarcely listened to his friend's tirade, until that particular monosyllable awoke him from his reverie. "Heart! Why, the devil himself, if there is such a personage, has more heart, as you call it, than Raphael Branscombe. He's a wretch, Phil—that's a fact."

"Well," said the honest yachtsman, looking at Stephen with considerable astonishment, "I'm surprised to hear *you* say that. I thought you were one of his chief cronies; you were always together in London."

"My dear fellow," returned Stephen, "what you say is quite

true, and I am quite sure it surprises me more than it ever could you to remember my intimate association with him; but you know it was a case of Faust and Mephistopheles."

"For God's sake, don't quote the classics to me, old boy; I never could remember anything I learnt at school; I haven't opened a book since—except it was a novel. Who the deuce were the heavy swells you mentioned?"

"It doesn't matter," said Stephen. "What I meant to say was, that Branscombe exerts a strange kind of influence over me; I can't resist him."

"Ha—mesmerism. Saw a fellow mesmerised once—awful fool he looked. Shouldn't have thought that would have operated with *you*."

This extremely interesting colloquy was interrupted by the advance of Angelo Montalti. How changed from the hospitable patriarch who welcomed Raphael Branscombe to the old house amid the olive orchards! *Then* he was full of joyous welcome, of antique poetry, of simple Homeric delight in the current of events; now he looked like an avenger. There was a lambent fire in his dark eye, and his firm lips showed resolve immovable. As he approached, Stephen Langton had a vision of what must happen if the old man and Raphael Branscombe should meet face to face.

Stephen knew the Seraph pretty well by this time; knew him utterly fearless—utterly remorseless. He could imagine this old man, inspired by heroic grief and incalculable injury, confronting Raphael Branscombe. He could see the Seraph's lips tighten, his keen eye flash, his unerring hand point the pistol at his antagonist, and pull the trigger without an instant's hesitation. He felt certain that if Angelo Montalti attempted to revenge himself—the Corsican, not the Englishman, would suffer. Meanwhile the old man had come near to them, on the seawall, beneath which the sapphire sea lay like a magic mirror, redoubling every cloudlet, every skiff, every seabird that floated above it. Whereupon Seagull Palliser said—

"I'll leave you to your talk, old fellow. You know where to find me. Yacht's at your service, if you want to go anywhere or do anything." And away went Phil Palliser, rejoicing to escape from that atmosphere of tragedy wherein he who can breathe must have sound lungs and strong. The conversation between the old Corsican and Stephen soon placed the latter thoroughly in possession of all the facts. Angelo Montalti talked with almost extreme calm—the calm of an immovable resolve. Stephen was unable to persuade himself that Fiordilisa's betrayer was any other than the Seraph. Nor, indeed, had it been an ordinary betrayal, would he have tried so to persuade himself, for he knew Raphael's recklessness in such matters; but when he heard that the Seraph had actually *married* the girl, he became incredulous. Any number of crimes might be predicated of the hope of the Branscombes, and his best friends would believe; but that he

should commit a *bêtise* appeared more incredible to those who knew him best, than the book of Exodus to Bishop Colenso. Stephen greatly admired the heroic old Corsican, who had given up what remained of his life to consoling his grand-daughter, and then to avenging her.

"I talk not of vengeance to *her*," he said. "I would not kill the poor child whom this man has stabbed to the very core of her heart. She must die—it will not be long—and then I will avenge her. Meanwhile, let her believe, if she can, that he is loyal. I shall live to avenge her—that I know. I shall be the last of the Montalti."

Stephen proposed to him that they should take the yacht round to Isola Rossa, thinking that the company of an Englishman who knew the Seraph might tranquillise to some extent Fiordilisa's troubled heart. Seagull Palliser, the kindest of men, would fall into any plan, he knew—always provided he was allowed to keep beyond the limits of the tragedy. The old Corsican accepted this offer, and they went back together to the locanda at which he had left his grand-daughter. Fiordilisa was calmer. She had found some inexplicable way of reconciling the position of affairs with her own scarcely shaken faith in Raphael. She thought: this Englishman is his friend; perhaps he knows more than he has told; perhaps my Raffaelle has sent him here to see me, but does not allow him to tell me so; perhaps he is indeed ill or in prison, but will not let me know for fear of frightening me. I will believe this. He is *true*—I know he is *true*. He might have trusted the courage of a Corsican woman—but he thought me a child perhaps. Thus arguing, thus striving to persuade herself of what she longed to believe, Fiordilisa had grown calm.

Hearing a good report of her, Stephen crossed the Place du Diamant to his own locanda, and he and Palliser dined satisfactorily. Corsica is a rare place to dine, for a man of tastes unspoilt. If you are incapable of getting beyond the fashionable routine of London cookery, in Heaven's name stick to your club and your *chef*. But I can eat anything: I like the frogs' legs of Paris, and the vine snails of Burgundy; I would try fried boa-constrictor or devilled condor without the hesitation of an instant; I should not object to the roasted sides of sheep, with dark-green melons, and goblets of mares' milk, that Mr. Matthew Arnold makes the heroes of his poems eat and drink. And the fish and fruit of Corsica are divine to an epicure of the right sort—an epicure, I mean, not afraid of fresh flavours, untried combinations, originalities of the palate. The man who would hesitate to try a hedgehog upon anchovy toast has no right to the noble title of epicure—the second in the world—poet being first. Langton and Palliser dined, and over the fiery wine of Ajaccio the former communicated to the gallant owner of the *Seagull* the offer he had made. Palliser was perfectly willing.

"Queer affair, old boy," he said; "you're always doing the romantic. Glad to go round and see some more of the island.

Mustn't expect me to interfere in the matter, though. Not my line, you know." So it was settled.

They had that evening another pleasant stroll amid the simple Corsican flirtations of the Cour Napoléon and the Place du Diamant. But Palliser, though enticed by the mystery of the faldetta, inaugurated no adventure. The next morning shone deliciously. Old Angelo Montalti and the faithful Marc Antonio were astounded at the light step with which Fiordilisa tripped down to go on board the Englishman's yacht. What did it mean? thought her grandfather. Had the Englishman told her any secret news? There was a light in her eyes, the pallor had passed from her perfect oval cheeks; could the Seraph at this moment have beheld her, surely he would have forgotten Anne Morfill and returned to the beautiful creature whom he had deserted.

Marc Antonio was left to manage the dancing little *Fantasia*. With a favouring wind, the *Seagull* soon came in sight of those blood-red cliffs which had beheld the passionate idyl of Fiordilisa's love. During the brief voyage, Stephen had been her courteous cavalier. When she looked at him, her eyes had meaning which Stephen could not fathom. They strove to tell him that his secret was discovered—that he came from Raphael—that he was a bringer of good tidings not yet to be revealed. Stephen could not at all understand this change in Fiordilisa's mood. She was almost gay She made him look at the distant mass of Rotondo, across Sagone's gulf, and told him how the goatherds dwelt high up among the granite rocks, and how the river Restonica thundered down through the forest-belt of giant pines. She showed him Cape Rossa and the heights of Paglia, all granite and porphyry, and little Calvi, whose citizens maintain that their town gave birth to Christopher Columbus. And soon the grey towers and ruddy island-cliffs of Isola Rossa came in sight; and Fiordilisa pointed out the old stone house of the Montalti among the ancient orchards on the hill-side, above the enchanted beach, exclaiming—"There! That is our home—Raffaelle's and mine."

Strange indeed this reaction of gaiety seemed to Stephen. What could it mean? It was so complete a contrast to the passionate grief and dumb despair of yesterday. She could have heard nothing. She was not light of love—consolable by one Englishman for the loss of another. No; he could see at once that her love for Raphael was pure and perfect—a gem without flaw.

Angelo Montalti was also much perplexed by his darling's recovered gaiety. Sorrow had smitten her long. Her heart seemed broken. And now she sat in the stern of Palliser's beautiful little craft, carefully enveloped in many coloured flags and wrappings, such as English yachtsmen always crowd around ladies even in the summer Mediterranean—a perfect picture of renewed beauty and subdued delight. More beautiful than when first wooed by Raphael, for the tender grace of grief had touched and refined her delicate fair face, and she might have passed for a Madonna by her husband's immortal namesake, with the thought in her virgin

heart that her unborn baby was divine. So the *Seagull* came gaily round the point to Isola Rossa. It was the most languid moment of the afternoon. All the villagers had turned out to catch some freshness from the swift sea breeze, and to await the *Fantasia*. For they all knew the grief of Fiordilisa, the child-beauty of the little town, for whom they had begun to expect a princess's destiny. They had crowded to the coral-veined beach; and among them was our pleasant little friend Chilina, hostess of the locanda, expecting Marc Antonio. But it was not the *Fantasia* that came round the point. The English yacht had distanced the dancing darling of the Midland Sea. The saucy schooner furled her sails, and a boat was let down, into which descended Fiordilisa and her guardian and two others. Could one of these be Raffaelle? thought the eager islanders. The stalwart strokes of four stout English seamen soon landed the pinnace. The disappointed crowd perceived that the two men were strangers, yet even the crowd perceived that the Lily of Isola Rossa had a brighter eye and lighter tread. Absorbed in the landing of Fiordilisa and her companions, the folk on the beach had no ears for the tread of horses behind, but suddenly a rapid gallop of hoofs became audible, and every one was aware of two horsemen approaching at the top of their speed from the Algajola road. The foremost horse came on at a tremendous pace; reaching the shore, the panting animal was reined up with a sudden sharpness, and there sprang from the saddle close at Fiordilisa's pretty feet—Raphael Branscombe!

CHAPTER XXIX.

A BLACK NIGHT'S WORK.

AY, the Seraph was there, to the amazement of everybody except Fiordilisa. She saw her expectation realised. She sprang into his arms without a word. She brightened blushfully into the wondrous beauty of her maidenhood. Her fears and doubts were put to flight for ever. How had Raphael reached Isola Rossa at the very nick of time?—he whom we saw last arranging an elopement in the purlieus of Mesopotamia? He had seen a good many curious events while the *Seagull* had been voyaging the blue waters of the Mediterranean. I must follow his course for a while.

Humphrey Morfill had arranged to start on his foreign mission at an early hour on a certain Wednesday morning. Raphael, duly apprised thereof, arranged to carry off Humphrey's erring wife about two hours earlier. He laughed maliciously at the idea of Morfill's irate perplexity when Anne should have mysteriously vanished at the very moment of departure. The evening of Tuesday had arrived; every detail was settled; the Seraph sat in his sanctum in Clarges Street lazily smoking when Louis entered, looking as if he had bad news to communicate.

"Well, Louis, what's the matter?"

"I beg your pardon, sir—I hope I'm wrong; it's something about Miss Branscombe," said the valet very hesitatingly.

"Go on."

"I'm afraid, sir, she's thinking of going off with Sir Arthur this evening."

Raphael laughed. "That would be a curious coincidence," he said to himself. "But what do you know about it, Louis?"

"There have been meetings to-day between Margot and Sir Arthur's man. She's outside waiting for him now. I expect she'll bring a letter." Margot was Claudia's French maid, a tall, handsome girl, whom Louis rather admired. Doubtless a touch of jealousy had put him on the scent. Raphael looked at his watch; it was nearly eleven. He rose at once, and descended into the passage. Swinging baize-covered doors interposed between the staircase and the front door. Over the latter burnt a lamp.

"Keep in the background, Louis," he said. "Leave her to me."

The Seraph stood behind the baize doors, and through an oval pane of glass watched for the girl's coming. Presently the front door cautiously opened; Margot stepped in softly, and closed it soundlessly, and Raphael saw in her hand a letter, which she hid in the bosom of her dress before she pushed open the inner doors. The moment she entered he pinioned her arms with irresistible force, putting his hand upon her mouth to stop the expected scream.

"You are found out," he said in a whisper. "Be silent."

He took the letter from its hiding-place, and handed the girl over to the valet's care.

"Bring her up to Miss Branscombe's room," he said.

Claudia was sitting expectant. She had heard nothing of the movement below, for an ante-room divided her sitting-room from the stairs. She sat with those bright eyes of hers fixed upon the door, awaiting Margot's arrival. The door opened. Raphael entered, a letter in his hand. Claudia sank back in her chair and covered her eyes with her hands.

"I have not yet read this letter," he said, "but I know it is from Sir Arthur Willesden. Let me read it to you." He broke the seal and read thus—

"Darling, to-night at twelve, or as soon after as possible, come to me here. The door will be ajar. You will see no one; my servant will be at ——'s stable with the carriage. I hope the maid you bring with you is trustworthy.—ARTHUR."

A friend of mine once showed me a rare miniature painting on ivory of the Archangel Michael. There was marvellous youthful beauty in the face, but it was the beauty of an avenger. You would say that thus he looked before he fell with irresistible might on the arch-rebel of whom Mr. John Milton has made a hero. Even thus looked the Seraph as he threw this note of the Assyrian baronet's upon a table, and exclaimed to his sister with intensity of contempt—"*You——a Branscombe!*"

There was a brief pause, which to Claudia seemed like an hour. Then she threw herself at her brother's feet crying, "Oh! I love him so, Raphael! I love him so!" She had positively persuaded herself that it was true. This is what comes of a passionate woman's remaining too long unmarried.

"Love *him!*" said the Seraph with utter scorn.

It certainly seemed strange. Claudia was a woman fit to wed a Cæsar; the baronet was simply a heavy swell, large, inane, good-looking, perfumed.

"Now," said Raphael, "let us settle this matter at once. I am rather busy to-night. Will you write a note to this fellow declining all further intercourse with him, and I'll take it round and horsewhip him? That's the proper course."

"I cannot," she said. "I cannot. I love him, Raphael."

"Pshaw! . . . Will he marry you?"

"Oh yes! I know he will—I know he will."

"Do you?" He took up the letter again and looked at it. It gave him an idea. He opened the door of the ante-room and beckoned Louis and Margot to enter. He scanned the French girl from head to foot.

"'Twill do," he said. "Margot, go into your mistress's bedroom and take off your dress and underclothing. Quick; don't waste time. . . . I shall go with you, Claudia, in that girl's dress."

Claudia was silent. Her bedroom was beyond the room in which they were, and had no other outlet. The girl obeyed orders.

"Louis," said Raphael, "go to my room and bring a lot of silk handkerchiefs—a dozen, if you can find them."

When the valet returned, the Seraph said to his sister, "Now, come and dress. Be quick!"

They entered the bedroom. Margot, divested of most of her apparel, had slipped into Claudia's bed. But she was not allowed to remain in peace. Raphael was determined that she should not, in their absence, alarm the other servants. It was no time to stand on ceremony. With the handkerchiefs that Louis had brought he safely gagged her and bound her hand and foot, fastening her immovably to the bed. Then he pulled off his coat and waistcoat and arrayed himself in Margot's dress, which fitted him fairly enough. This done, he turned to his sister, saying, "Claudia, lead the way. When you get to Jermyn Street you can ask Willesden to marry you. If he will, all right; if he won't, he must take the consequences. . . . Louis, keep near us, but on the other side of the street, and follow me quietly when I come out again." The Panther led the way downstairs and along desolate Piccadilly, Raphael following in the guise of a female attendant. Her heart failed her. She knew her brother's implacable resolve. She walked as if in a dream. Arrived at Sir Arthur Willesden's residence, Claudia pushed open the front door and quietly ascended to the first floor, Raphael following. Louis took up a position as sentinel in the shadow of a doorway on the opposite side of the street.

"Ah, my pet," exclaimed Sir Arthur as Claudia entered, "how good of you to be punctual!"

He sprang towards her, and tried to embrace her, heedless of the apparent *soubrette* who stood respectfully at the door. But Claudia sank at his feet, and cried in a low, passionate voice—

"Will you marry me, Arthur? *Will you?*"

This was not exactly what the baronet had expected, and he was by no means the man for the situation. He commenced a hesitating explanation about his difficulties—the Jews—that they would be down upon him if he married—and much else that was equally to the purpose. Claudia could only repeat her pitiful question; her presence of mind had deserted her.

"You don't intend to marry this young lady?" suddenly said the Seraph in a falsetto voice.

"Who the devil are you? What the devil do *you* mean by this impertinence?" said the baronet, who, like all stupid big men, was delighted to have somebody to bully when he saw no way out of a difficulty. The effect was electric. Probably Sir Arthur would have preferred something less surprising.

"I am Raphael Branscombe," said the Seraph, taking off poor Margot's bonnet and veil, and leisurely proceeding to unpetticoat himself.

"Oh! I see!" said the baronet, sulkily swearing. "This is a trap."

"Ay, it's a trap," returned Raphael, who stood in his shirt and trousers, ready for action. "You're caught in it, my fine fellow. You wanted to run away with my sister, but you didn't want to marry her—rather a dangerous game, you'll find."

Sir Arthur's wits had become chaotic. He could find no reply. Raphael's eye had caught a pair of foils on a side-table. He took them up, broke off the buttons, and turned their hilts to the baronet.

"Here, choose!" he said. "You're not a coward, I suppose."

The baronet looked as if he could crush his lighter opponent, and as if he meant to do it; but Raphael's keen, fearless glance deterred him. Claudia had sunk half fainting upon a sofa. Sir Arthur took a foil.

"We shall want pen, ink, and paper," said the Seraph. "Oh! here they are."

"What do you mean?" growled the baronet.

"Why, if you kill me you don't want to be hanged, I suppose; and I'm sure I don't if I kill you. Just write what I tell you."

The baronet wrote, at Raphael's dictation:—

"Having debts that I can never pay, and being in fear of arrest, I have decided to commit suicide.—ARTHUR WILLESDEN."

And the Seraph wrote:—

"My sister has eloped with Sir Arthur Willesden. I will not survive the dishonour.—RAPHAEL BRANSCOMBE."

"There!" said the Seraph. "Now, if you kill me, just burn

Claudia shuddered on her couch. Raphael pushed aside the centre table, and the two men engaged. Sir Arthur attacked passionately. The Seraph, a master of fence, with a wrist of steel, enraged him horribly by disarming him, and then lowering his point while he picked up his weapon. A skilled spectator might have seen that Raphael was only playing with his victim. A clock over the chimney struck one. As if reminded that he had no time to spare, that instant Raphael made a lunge, and the steel passed right into Sir Arthur's heart. He fell heavily, without a word. Claudia, whom the terrible music of the colliding foils had roused from her apathy, and who, half raised, with straining eyes and clenched hands, had watched every pass, now fainted in good earnest. The Seraph's coolness was diabolical. He put in his pocket the document he had signed; took Willesden's foil from his relaxed hand, and replaced it; found some eau-de-cologne, with which he partially resuscitated his sister. Then, again arranging himself in the French girl's dress, he descended the stairs, supporting Claudia; made his way into the street, quietly closing the door after him, and walked home, followed by Louis. When they reached Claudia's apartment Raphael told Louis to release the prisoner.

"Take care of your mistress," said the Seraph to Margot; "and whatever you may hear, or whatever questions are asked you, the best thing you can do is to know nothing. You and Miss Branscombe both went to bed at eleven o'clock! Do you hear?"

The ready-witted girl showed that she understood. Raphael left the mistress and maid to their own devices, and went to his own rooms, where he carefully cooled himself after his exertions, having previously observed to his servant—

"You had better get ready for our next affair, Louis. Half-past two, at Hyde Park Corner."

The Seraph's adventure had made him neither excited nor meditative. He dressed himself for travel, mounting a coat lined with abundant furs. Then, lighting a cigar, he turned out once more, and as he paced the pavement towards the place of appointment, he sang in that luscious tenor of his—

"Que d'alarmes!
Que de larmes!
Un pas d'armes,
C'est très-beau!"

A bright moon had arisen by the time he reached Hyde Park Corner, at which place stood motionless a carriage with four horses. As he approached, Louis came forward and opened the door. Raphael sprang in, to the baby beauty who awaited him there with palpitating heart; Louis shut the door, and climbed to the box; and away went the horses at that racing pace which your postilion knows so well to command when there is certainty of abundant gold. And away they went on the Bath Road, which the subtle Seraph had chosen because he designed, by doubling,

to escape the pursuit which he hoped Morfill would institute. And poor little foolish Anne Page nestled to his side in perfect happiness. At this most perilous crisis of her fate she for the first time felt safety. Not the first or the last, I suppose, of her sex, to whom that has seemed or will seem the best which in very truth is the worst possible. At about sixty miles from Hyde Park Corner, in a dull town, where post-chaises were seldom seen, the Seraph's rapid equipage pulled up just as everybody was at breakfast. The principal inn was called the Bear; this the travellers entered, and Raphael at once sent Anne to bed, with some warm liquid to comfort her. She was not able to bear the toils of rapid travel, he knew full well. Then he sent back the post-chaise, the postillions having been sufficiently fee'd to ensure secrecy as to their route, if any inquiry chanced to be made of them.

His first care was to arrange with the landlord for a light trap and a fast horse to take him some fourteen miles that afternoon. The days were long; he would give his victim a few hours' sleep, and then drive her across country into another road. There was no difficulty about the matter. Having settled it, and feeling restless, he left Louis in charge, and took a stroll through a pleasant river valley near the town. Chance led him to a fine old house; he thought he would wear the time away by inspecting it, and so asked at a lodge whether he could be admitted. The family were absent, and he found entrance. A quaint old place—its hall hung with the veritable armour—buff jerkins and steel caps—of Cromwell's irresistible Ironsides. There was a legend connected with it—a legend of a secret birth, and a new-born child ruthlessly thrust into a mighty fire—which was told him by an old-world crone of a housekeeper with a terror in her face—

> "A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing,
> Whose passing-bell might ere the midnight toll."

Raphael lightly laughed at the weird tale, and delighted her with a sovereign, and strolled back to the old inn in the somnolent town.

In the afternoon, his companion being refreshed with sleep and food and wine, away they started north-eastward. The latter part of the drive was over breezy chalk-downs, from whose farther slope they descended to a town even more ancient, though perhaps not duller, where they stopped at an inn of the same name, and at once ordered dinner. The Seraph rejoiced to find a bottle of good old port in this quaint country inn. And when he strolled out into the market place, he also rejoiced to find a yellow full moon, high above the fine tower of the old church—a tower with a tree growing on its summit.

"By Jove!" he said to himself, "the little party looks wonderfully refreshed by her feed. Another drive of about the same length will do her no harm." He was full of the pleasure of eluding pursuit. He found already that he should soon be very weary

of his victim—though I think he considered himself hers—and thought only of depositing her in safe quarters, and baffling Morfill. She had such supreme confidence in him that she obeyed him implicitly. Poor little thing! He had sent back his horse and trap. He had no difficulty in obtaining another. Away they went again, and at the end of about fourteen miles more, crossed the noblest of England's rivers, and ascended a street on whose right was a long and lofty building. From the dome above its noble gateway a mighty bell was slowly pealing as they passed. They turned to the right, beyond this famous edifice, and drove down a superb street, where old-fashioned shops mingled with colleges and churches, and where young men in scholastic costume jostled the crowds in ordinary dress, thronging the pavement beneath the serene moonlight. Half-way down the street he pulled up at a hostelry, whose fame he knew full well, and there they spent the night.

Post-horses were ordered for an early hour next morning, and before noon on Thursday Raphael and his companion, calling themselves Mr. and Mrs. Butler, were breakfasting at an old-fangled inn in Gracechurch Street, in a room on a gallery overlooking a dirty, picturesque courtyard; and Mr. Butler was searching the papers for news. He was not disappointed. The evening papers of the previous night had, of course, an account of Sir Arthur Willesden's being found dead, with various speculations on the subject. The *Globe* (and *Traveller?*) mysteriously referred to Mr. Humphrey Morfill's departure on his mission being delayed by a domestic calamity. The morning journals had fuller information on both topics. There was a doubt whether Sir Arthur *could* have stabbed himself with the foil from the position in which it was found. But then there was his own statement in writing, the authenticity of which had been fully proved, his autograph being only too well known in the London money market. Again, his man-servant deposed that Sir Arthur had ordered post-horses, and intended to leave town soon after midnight, but he did not know where he was going, or whether he was going alone. Then Mr. Humphrey Morfill had been on the point of starting for abroad, to perform the highly-important duties of his appointment, when it was suddenly discovered that Mrs. Morfill had left the house, and could be traced nowhere. Mr. and Mrs. Morfill had always been on the best of terms. There were, however, one or two super-sapient editors who fancied there might be a connection between Mrs. Morfill's disappearance and Sir Arthur's post-horses. And an intelligent member of the new police recollected having seen two females near Sir Arthur's house, in Jermyn Street, late on Tuesday night, or early on Wednesday morning, he did not quite know which. Claudia and Claudia's *fille de chambre* seemed to have made no sign. Not a word was said of the Seraph. Why, indeed, should there be?

It was a queer imbroglio, to which Edgar Allan Poe might have done justice. I don't think I ought to have let my readers into the secret. If I had opened the story with a dead baronet lying in a Jermyn Street first floor with a foil through his heart, and a young barrister, just appointed on a mission to the East, losing his wife half an hour before he started I doubt whether my enigmatical namesake could have presented a neater puzzle. However, it is a little too late to re-write the novel—I'm at folio 605—and so you must even be content with a straightforward story. The Seraph, having breakfasted, and read the papers, left Louis in charge of Mrs. Butler, and made his way westward. His habits were notoriously irregular, so that nobody was likely to inquire where he had spent Wednesday. He had dined at the Chandos at seven o'clock on Tuesday evening; he lounged in now, at about four o'clock on Thursday, with the most nonchalant air imaginable.

"Hallo, Branscombe," said Frank Maule, whom he encountered in the superb columnar atrium of the Chandos, "you've heard the news, of course?"

Frank was a great mathematician, Senior Wrangler and Smith's Prizeman of his year—and also a great drinker of port wine. He was specially fond of difficult social problems, and estimates of probability; and there was some talk of Lord Cheiron, who was a great friend of his father, forming a department of High Police and putting him at the head of it. But the papers took the alarm, declaring that such an institution would be used for political purposes; so nothing came of it. Frank ultimately took holy orders, and married a bishop's daughter, and is at present an archdeacon and well-beneficed rector. This double enigma excited his curiosity.

"About Willesden, you mean?" said the Seraph quietly. "Only just seen it in the papers. I was out of town yesterday. A man must be a muff to commit suicide because he was in debt."

"Was it suicide?" asked Maule. "You saw he had made arrangements for going away; post-horses were ordered. Besides, I went into the room with the police, and I noticed what they didn't, that the other foil had the button off it."

"What's your theory?" said Brabazon Aylmer, one of a group who had gathered round the talkers.

"It is premature to form anything at all like a theory. But Branscombe can perhaps help me to something like the preliminaries of a hypothesis. Do you know," asked Maule, "whether there was any intimacy between Sir Arthur and Mrs. Morfill? You knew them both, I think."

"Why, Mrs. Morfill is my cousin, and I saw Willesden often enough, though we were never intimate; and they used to meet one another, now and then, at my sister's rooms in Clarges Street; but I don't think they were at all on familiar terms. I see what you are fancying."

"Well," said Frank Maule, "if Willesden meant to run away with anybody, which doesn't seem unlikely, it *might* have been Mrs. Morfill. Morfill might have found out that she was gone, and suspected Willesden, and gone to Jermyn Street to see. In any case, whether Morfill's suspicion was just or not, they might have quarrelled and fought."

"You're making it deucedly potential," said Brabazon Aylmer.

"And I think," said Raphael, "in order to construct a scientific theory, it is necessary you should account for Mrs. Morfill's disappearance, over which her unhappy husband is at present tearing his hair."

"Tell you what," said Horace Chichester, captain in the Guards, famous for his recklessness of theory, "suppose Morfill and Willesden fought, and Morfill killed Willesden, and then the young woman came to Willesden's rooms expecting to be run away with, and then Morfill killed her, and now hypocritically pretends he don't know anything about her? By Jove, perhaps he stuffed her dead body up the chimney! Did anybody look, Maule?"

"I didn't," said Maule, laughing. "Really, Chichester, your theory is not a bad one. If Mrs. Morfill was killed at Willesden's rooms, it would be difficult to remove her corpse."

"Pshaw!" interposed the Seraph, "all this is nonsense. If there had been anything between Willesden and Mrs. Morfill, I should certainly have known it. She'd have been likelier to run away with me, if that was at all my line."

"Egad, I like that," said Captain Chichester. "Why, you're a most dangerous fellow, everybody knows."

"When you find me running away with anybody, old fellow, abuse me as much as you please. But who can tell me what Morfill is doing?"

"The poor fellow is half mad," said Maule. "One hears of him or meets him everywhere, making inquiries in all sorts of impossible places. He was here last night, taking counsel of me. You won't find him at home."

"I suppose not," observed Raphael. "If you're going to dine here, Maule, let us feed together. I should like to see Morfill if he should look in."

"We four will dine together," said Chichester. "I'll order the dinner—anchovy salad to begin, and a bloater to finish—eight o'clock. I like a nice little dinner when there's a pleasant subject of conversation. You fellows may trust to me. I'll look to the wines. The Margaux's better than the Lafitte, I think. Perhaps Mrs. Morfill's body will be found by that time."

"Better order some port with a body in it," said Maule drily.

"Well, never mind; eight sharp. You may depend on me for a good dinner. You three go and pick up all the news you can."

"I shall stroll round to Jermyn Street and hear if there's anything fresh," said Frank Maule.

"You are the likeliest of us to pick up news," said the Seraph.

"I'm too lazy. If any of you see Morfill, tell him I shall be here this evening."

Raphael, of course, knew that Morfill's servants, aware of their mistress's intimacy with him, might well suspect him of having taken her away. But he had not heard of any such suspicion being expressed by Humphrey, so he thought he would meet him and ascertain for himself how matters stood. On that Wednesday morning Anne had slipt unseen from the house, met Louis in a neighbouring square, and walked with the valet some distance to the post-chaise. She had left no trace. And public opinion—or what passed for that—muddled the affair by persistently connecting Mrs. Morfill's disappearance with Sir Arthur Willesden's death. Raphael, leaving the Chandos, went straight to Clarges Street, where his absence and Louis's had not caused the least surprise among the servants. Their movements were always sudden and abrupt. He found that his sister was secluded and unseen—very ill, said a handmaiden, whereupon he ordered Margot to be sent to him. That young person, who rather resented having been tied down on a bed in the airy costume of chemise and femoralia, appeared sulkily. With anybody else her indignation would have been loquacious, but the Seraph terrified her. He learnt from her that Claudia was in a variable state—fierce sometimes, sometimes sullen. But the terrible scene through which she had passed had not disordered her senses. And the girl had not as yet, apparently, heard anything from any source to connect Jermyn Street with Clarges Street on that night of horror.

The Seraph, having learnt from Margot the position of affairs with her mistress, allowed her to leave him, much to her satisfaction. He did not want to see Claudia. He felt as if she was no longer his sister. He was as much amazed as anything could amaze him, by the betrayal of such weakness by a Branscombe. It was not the wickedness, it was the silliness of the thing which annoyed the Seraph. It may seem surprising that Raphael Branscombe, whose pastime through life had been taking advantage of the weakness of women, should visit an escapade so sternly on his sister; but the truth is, that he was surprised and disappointed at a Branscombe showing such weakness. If she had been a Borgia or a Brinvilliers, he would have readily forgiven her. But that she should succumb to the gross attractions of Sir Arthur Willesden—that she should be willing to sacrifice herself for a man whom Raphael held utterly in contempt, was what he could not forgive.

Raphael Branscombe considered women the natural quarry of men, even as the heron of the falcon. He had

"The wing of the hawk that shall fetch the hernshaw."

He was ready any day to run away with any woman, and to give "satisfaction" to all her relations, one after the other. But he was disgusted to find that his sister belonged to the heron tribe.

It was solemnly debated in the Council of Trent whether woman is really the female of man. After this little affair of Claudia's, Raphael thought not. Having ascertained to his own satisfaction the state of affairs in Clarges Street, the Seraph took wing to the old eastern hostelry where he had left Mrs. Morfill under Louis's care. He found her safe and patient. She was in a curious mood. Her absolute infatuated love for him rendered her perfectly content to do his bidding, present or absent; she was *his*—that was all she knew or cared to know. Being his, she would do all that he told her, would obey him in the merest minutiæ, would find her fullest delight in so doing. The love-fever has variable symptoms; this was little Anne's diagnosis. When Raphael told her she was to leave England in Louis's company, to be rejoined by him in the course of days or weeks, she acquiesced delightedly, happy to obey whom she loved. So the Seraph, knowing Louis's ability and loyalty, started them for the Continent, making an arrangement for meeting in Italy. And then he returned to the Chandos, where Captain Chichester had occupied the interval in ordering dinner. An excellent dinner it was. There were a heap of people dining at the club that day. ("*Heap* of people—vulgar slang!" "Slang is young language," says my friend Mr. Cayley, poet and politician; is it not rather old language, sometimes?—See the "Saxon Chronicles.") What a parenthesis, ye gods! As the four men sat over their wine, Humphrey Morfill entered. How altered was that erudite, sagacious, business-like young scion of the law! Had he loved his wife, then? Was it passion for "Sweet Anne Page" which had made his eyes so wild, and given his cheek so strange a pallor? Not a bit of it. It was the shame of the public knowledge that she had left him—the annoyance of being placed before the world in a ludicrous, even an ignominious position.

Morfill was a man who could bear anything except being laughed at. Put him in a barrel full of spikes, as they say Regulus was served, and he would take it easily. But he had begun life with a resolve to live with dignity. He was determined to be infinitely respectable. And, alone in the world, he would have carried out his scheme; but a man cannot control the actions of his wife. Morfill's dignity was wounded by Anne's disappearance, and no severer blow could have been inflicted on him. Morover, certain rumours had now reached him, vaguely enough, of Raphael's being on terms of unsuspected intimacy with his wife. And somebody had told him that the Seraph was at the Chandos. So he came into the dining-room in a ferocious state, bent on quarrelling with the only man whom he could connect with his wife's disappearance. Raphael was quietly sipping his wine, and listening to Frank Maule's subtle speculations, and Captain Chichester's extravagant theories, when Morfill stalked up to the table.

"Mr. Branscombe, may I speak to you?"

"By all means," said the Seraph. "What is it, old fellow?"

"What do you know about my wife?"

"Just what I see in the papers," he replied, with insolent coolness. "Is there anything *new* about her?"

"I am credibly informed you have been on very familiar terms with her—much too familiar."

"Credibly informed," said the Seraph deliberately. "It seems curious for a man to rely upon others for information about his wife. Have you any other *credible* information?"

Morfill was getting more and more enraged, while the men who were dining with the Seraph looked on with surprise at his tone.

"If a man's profession," he said furiously, "takes him from home, the man who takes advantage of his absence is a villain."

"Don't be offensive," said the Seraph. "Your wife was my cousin. Many a time have I had her in my arms—when she was a baby."

"Don't aggravate him, Branscombe," whispered Aylmer. "The poor devil doesn't know what he's about."

"I can't stand this," said Morfill impetuously. "I believe you know where my wife is gone. I believe you took her away."

"My good friend," said Raphael, rising from his chair, and throwing his napkin on the cloth, "she learnt from you to elope. You should not be surprised if she does a second time what she liked the first. Chichester, if he wants to fight, perhaps you'll act for me?" Therewith the Seraph turned slowly away, and went to the smoking-room, whither Maule and Aylmer followed him. By and by came the excitable captain. "All right," he said, "he means fighting. Wimbledon in the grey of the morning. Pistols. By Jove, he's awfully mad."

"Who is his second?" said Aylmer, for the Seraph was smoking as placidly as if the affair in no degree concerned him.

"Anstruther—sharp fellow—understands the thing perfectly."

"You didn't expect so exciting a dessert after your little dinner," said Frank Maule.

"I can't think why you provoked that poor devil, Branscombe," remarked Aylmer. "If you hadn't been so cursedly sarcastic there would have been no row."

"I dislike the man," said the Seraph. "He behaved very disreputably in taking away that little girl from my Uncle Walter's house. He only wanted her money, and he persuaded her—a mere baby at the time—to elope with him, although he must have known she was engaged to Langton. Now, as I told the fellow, she has profited by the lesson, and eloped with somebody else. It serves him right."

Raphael, while his friends conversed, had been occupied by a delicate point of casuistry. There is no casuist like your duellist. The Seraph, under ordinary circumstances of elopement, would, being the person culpable, have made it a point of honour to fire in the air; but in the present instance he argued that he had a previous cause of quarrel with Morfill for eloping with his cousin in the first place, so they were on equal terms clearly, and he had

a perfect right to take his own part. That night the four gentlemen who had dined together spent in the smoking-room of the Chandos. The club is always late, especially in its card rooms; but these four were the last in the place. Chichester recommended his principal to take an hour or two's rest; but the Seraph, though he had slept but little since Tuesday evening, was not to be persuaded.

"I'm not in the humour for sleep," he said.

"But cigars and brandy and seltzer will make your hand shake," urged Chichester.

"Not a bit. If I went to bed I might possibly feel shaky when I turned out again; but I'm quite firm enough to wing a lawyer."

"I wonder is he a good shot?" said Aylmer.

"If he is, I'll eat him," replied Captain Chichester. "But bad shots are like bad whist-players—they have such cursed luck."

"*He*'ll have no luck," quietly remarked Raphael.

"You seem to feel very safe," said Maule.

"I do. One can pretty well tell, I think. I shall get shot one of these days—a ball through the lungs; but Morfill won't do it. But surely you fellows are tired of this subject. Let's have a game at whist."

They played whist till daybreak. Then the Seraph and his second, and a surgeon whose services had been retained, drove off to Wimbledon, while Maule and Aylmer walked to their respective quarters through the fresh quiet of the morning.

"I hope Branscombe won't get hurt," remarked the good-natured Aylmer. "He's a capital fellow."

"He's a very curious character," reflectively replied the more perspicacious Maule.

They met in Glen Cardigan—years before its baptism. Morfill was first on the ground; Anstruther had been utterly unable to restrain his nervous impatience, and they were twenty minutes before their time. As the Seraph neared the spot, he touched Captain Chichester lightly on the right shoulder, and said—"That's where he'll get it."

I have never been much impressed by the moralists who are horrified by the notion of two men standing opposite one another with this issue of life or death between them. Mr. Tennyson's lunatic hero is very eloquent about

> "The Christless code
> That must have life for a blow;"

but the arguments of maniacs ought not to have much weight. "Life for a blow," however, save in very bad cases, I would not demand; but there *are* crimes which only the duel can punish; and the man who seduces a woman ought to be ready to stand and be shot at by her nearest relation. This is a maudlin, mawkish, sentimental, hypocritical age. But there are symptoms of reaction, and I believe an advanced civilisation will bring us back

a few things we have foolishly cast away—among them, in cases of deadly dishonour, the duel. I suppose the critics will say this is "padding." Who cares?

The two men fired simultaneously. Morfill's bullet ploughed the ground a yard on Raphael's left. Morfill himself went down with a wound in his right shoulder. The surgeon examined it, and declared there was no serious harm done. And so ended that act of the drama.

CHAPTER XXX.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

THE Panther, shut into her room, brooded over her mischance. She was desperately dissatisfied with herself. She recognised the mistake she had made in Sir Arthur Willesden. The man whom she had loved was a creature of her own passionate imagination, differing utterly from the real baronet. She did not feel the slightest pity for Sir Arthur.

> "Nay, you know
> You never could have mercy,"

says Chastelard to Queen Mary in Mr. Algernon Swinburne's fine tragedy. There was no touch of mercy in Claudia. She felt that the baronet was rightly served. She adored her brother for the deed done by his remorseless sword. But she despised herself. This was the worst of it. That she, who hitherto had worked her wicked will with men, should have been the victim of a gross half-coward, half-fop, like the dead baronet! That she should have surrendered her heart to this mere animal—a kind of human bladder, which collapsed at the touch of Raphael's foil! That Stephen Langton should refuse her was, we may well deem, a terrible humiliation; but at any rate Stephen was worth loving. He was neither fop nor coward. He was true to the core. He would not have made lame excuses to a woman whom he loved, pleading at his feet for honourable treatment. Indeed, Claudia looked back to her *liaison* with Stephen, and did not blush thereat. He had refused her, true, but it was her own fault. He was loyal and loving. If she had played fast and loose with him she had none but herself to blame. It was quite otherwise in this last affair. She felt that she had fallen far short of the Branscombe standard in this matter. She deserved the contempt of her family. What, if he knew it, would her father say?

And where was her father? Occupied with her own affairs, she had thought but little of the old gentleman. Probably he was back at Kingsleat, superintending the rebuilding of the manor-house and enjoying the homage of his acquaintance and tenantry. She would go down and see. Even if he happened to be elsewhere,

her uncle Walter would receive her. Amid all her wandering thoughts there came no terror of the peril to Raphael by possible discovery of his having slain Sir Arthur Willesden. Somehow or other she had come to think of Raphael very much as he thought of himself—as safe from all such danger.

The Seraph had the most complete confidence that his hour was not yet come—that the weapon to wound him was yet unforged. Claudia shared her brother's faith. She knew of his return to Clarges Street on Thursday, but she did not wish to see him, feeling that he must despise her; and she heard from Margot with intense satisfaction that he was gone. The beautiful wild creature lay for hours together on a couch, scarce moving a limb, scarce lifting an eyelash, scarce conscious of anything external. All the while she was in agonised perplexity. What could she do? What would remove the contempt which her brother must feel for her? How should she regain the position from which she had descended—debasing, dethroning, un-Brauscombe-ing herself?

Suddenly a thought struck her like fire. She had been as quiet as death; the electric idea seemed to raise her from the dead. She sprang to her feet and went to the inner room, and looked upon the tall mirror which reflected her beauty day and night. She saw a wild and weary face before her. With curious eager eyes, in whose depths lurked lambent fire, looked Claudia upon herself. She searched with wild anxiety for fading colours and distorting curves. Surely there were none. Surely, as she stood there, half-veiled by her wondrous hair, she was still right beautiful. She might do mischief yet. She might have hearts thrown at her feet—and tread upon them—yet. She had made one great mistake, but it was not irretrievable. Raphael's fatal foil, as unerring as she was erring, had silenced for ever the only possible witness against her. And the Seraph was secrecy incarnate. He might despise her, but he would suffer none else to do it. She took good cheer, and made a great resolve of fresh conquest. Scarce had that resolve found definite form when Margot tapped at the door to say that Mr. Branscombe wanted to see her.

"Mr. Branscombe!" exclaimed Claudia, who felt certain it could not be Raphael, and whose thoughts journeyed to her uncles, Walter and Marmaduke.

"Your papa, mademoiselle," said Margot.

Claudia hastily resumed her attire, and hurried to receive her father. The old gentleman looked bored.

"Really, Claudia," he said, "you look younger and fresher than ever. Do you know, I find it's a perfect nuisance to have no duns. The people down at Idlechester and Kingsleat are so beastly civil I feel inclined to knock them down. I've got no excitement now."

"How is the house getting on?" inquired Claudia.

"Slowly—but well. It will be a noble place when it's finished. But I don't want to live in it; I'm not fit for a country gentle-

man's life. And I don't believe Raphael will ever settle down quietly. You'd better pick out some well-conducted country squire, Claudia, and go and live at Branscombe." Claudia laughed.

"I am not much fonder of a quiet life than you, papa. But are you going to stay in London? Everybody is just leaving town."

"London! Not if I know it. I shall go abroad; you can come with me if you like. You can be *bon camarade*, I know."

Indeed, Devil Branscombe had often found his daughter better company than his son. She had no troublesome effeminacies, and she did not possess that indolent obstinacy which made the Seraph an unsatisfactory comrade unless he always had his own way.

Among the many varieties of wives I should think the *femme bon camarade*, as Devil Branscombe put it, must be one of the best. There is the "superior woman," a remarkably nice party to marry. And then there is her very opposite. Well, the "natural woman" is far superior to the "superior woman"—but when Dame Nature takes it into her grand maternal head to say—

"I will make
A lady of my own,"

the result is sometimes a little namby-pamby. As for the "accomplished woman," who draws and dances and plays and sings as if she were the majority of the Muses rolled into one, anybody may have her for me. Preferable, doubtless, is the "domestic woman" who has Cussy and Ude and Soyer and Francatelli and Dr. Kitchener and Miss Acton and Crefydd at her fingers' ends, and would rather be roasted at the stake herself than allow the cook to over-roast a woodcock. Admirable, also, is the pretty stateswoman—the Mrs. Coningsby and Lady Vivian Ashleigh—of the two greatest living novelists. But the varieties are endless; and of the rarest is the *bon camarade*. I rather think these fast days will increase the class. Imagine a wife who can write a leader, or smoke a cigar, or look after luggage, or understand *Dod* or *Bradshaw* or the *Owl* as well as yourself! Is not the idea pleasant? Would it not be better to wed a woman who could be with you at all hours, than one whom you must leave in order to give certain portions of your mind full play?

"It's half the world to me, dear,
It's all the world to you,"

says a modern poetaster. Why should there be the distinction? Why should women lose *half* the world? There are a set of strong-minded females who see this absurdity, but would remedy it by the far greater absurdity of setting up woman as a rival to man. Pshaw, ye Cobbes and Martineaus! What woman wants is, not rivalry, but full partnership. Educate young girls to regard their future career as involving the most intimate association with men, and the happiness of the human race will be doubled. At present the two halves of the race are at war; and it is a proverb that a man of genius can seldom get on with his

wife. The eagle finds a mate whose "stormy scream" has no less terror than his own; the lioness is no slower in deeds of death than the black-maned monarch by whose side she crouches. Only one-half of the human race fears to share the life of the other half. But I think we shall mend these things.

"Where do you think of going?" asked Claudia.

"Naples," said her father. "Raphael will be there."

"Raphael will! How do you know?"

"Simply because, strange to say, he wrote and told me so. There is a possibility of somebody requiring his signature as well as mine, and he positively was thoughtful enough to write and say where he should be. Wasn't it good of him?"

"Wonderfully," said Claudia. "Oh, I am quite ready to go, papa. Naples will be delicious just now, and I am very tired of London."

"Very well," said the old gentleman; "then that's arranged. Can you start the day after to-morrow?"—"Yes."

"I'm at the Clarendon. I'll send over and let you know what time to be ready. Have you seen your Uncle Marmaduke or Isola lately?"

"They are staying in Spring Gardens. Raphael turned their house upside down. Didn't you hear of it?"—"No."

"Well, let *them* tell you. You'll laugh amazingly, I assure you."

"I was thinking they might like to go with us. Marmaduke must find it rather slow in London, where he knows nobody. Suppose you were to ask him?"

"Oh yes, that I will. We should make quite a respectable family party, and rather astonish Raphael when we came down upon him. I'll go round at once." So, as soon as Devil Branscombe had left her, the Panther ordered her carriage, and drove to Spring Gardens. She found Isola at home. That little party was thinking of Stephen Langton, I fear.

"Where is your father, *cugina mia?*" said Claudia.

"I hardly know. He will be here soon, no doubt."

"Papa is going abroad, going to Naples, and proposes that you and Uncle Marmaduke should come with us. What do you say?"

"Delightful!" exclaimed Isola, clapping her fairy hands; "and I think papa will go, for he seems to have nothing at all to do just now."

When the old Wolf came in, he expressed his perfect willingness to join the party with his daughter. Thus happened it that they four started together for Naples—the fathers hoping at least to dissipate their *ennui*, the daughters hoping for far more than that—hoping for love. "I'll start afresh," resolved the Panther. "I'm young yet—and not ugly."

"I *may* see Stephen," thought Isola. "I hope I may."

A pagan maiden would have prayed Aphrodite for that result; a Roman Catholic would have besought the Virgin or a favourite female saint. Wherefore not?

Raphael Branscombe, when he told his sire to write to him at

Naples, had no idea of being followed thither. He fancied the old gentleman so thoroughly occupied with re-edifying the mansion of the Branscombes that nothing would attract him from that pleasant occupation. His own idea was to mystify everybody as far as possible—to avoid everybody whom he knew. With this object, which he had set before himself rather for the fun of the thing than any real good he could do by it, he had bought a sailing-boat at Genoa, which he fitted up with considerable comfort, and ran along the glorious coast, looking in at Spezzia, Leghorn, Grosseto, Civita Vecchia, Terracina—running round Ischia and Capri, and at last settling down in the pleasant little Hotel Rispoli at Sorrento.

"Sorrento, stella d'amore!"

exclaims Filicaia; and what sayeth Frederick Locker, Praed's legitimate successor?—

"Sorrento! Love's star! Land
Of myrtle and vine!
I come from a far land
To kneel at thy shrine;
Thy brows wear a garland,
Oh, weave one for mine!"

If Raphael had been passionately in love with sweet Anne Page, and spending with her a mad honeymoon of ecstatic elopement, could there have been a pleasanter place for the purpose than Sorrento? I trow not. Unluckily, this was not precisely the Seraph's case. He had amused himself by another piece of fantastic disguise. He had provided himself with feminine attire, which he was an adept at using, and always went ashore with Anne in this amazing fashion. So there ran a rumour through Naples that two eccentric Englishwomen were travelling about in a sailing vessel; and they were, apparently, two Englishwomen who took up their quarters at Rispoli's. It was a charming little place then, in its delicious garden overlooking the queen of bays, with the exquisite fragrance of the orange groves around it; and where stands the present hotel—or where it did stand when last I was at Sorrento, Heaven knows what may have happened since—there was a divine pavilion on the brink of the precipice, where breakfast and dinner *al fresco* were intensely enjoyable. Here the Seraph and his erring companion established themselves for a while, the courteous landlord fancying he had two English ladies to deal with, and not for a moment suspecting that the elder and handsomer was in reality a dangerous, dexterous duellist, a fearless wooer of women, and antagonist of men. This being so, it seemed highly unlikely that the Seraph would be detected by his relations.

But he soon detected them. They had hired a palazzo—at least, the chief rooms—the prince to whom it belonged getting himself into some distant and difficult suite of garrets. Raphael was wont,

in the morning, leaving Anne to amuse herself by wandering in the orange grove, to cross the bay in a light skiff with, as sole companion, a young Columbus, such as my dear old friend (who has forgotten me), Walter Thornbury, met at Genoa ten years ago. And so one day, in the Street of the Giant, Raphael—dressed in the blue serge dress with anchor buttons of gold and a flat straw hat of an English yachtswoman, and smoking jauntily a Russian cigarette—came right upon Ralph Branscombe, and Marmaduke, Claudia, and Isola. Not one of them recognised him, though every one of them made some remark upon the eccentric Englishwoman. Isola was charmed. The notion of lounging independently through the broad squares and street of a foreign city arrided her greatly. The cigarette was the exquisite poetic climax.

"There! That's what I should like," she said, turning to look at the lovely apparition in navy blue. "Wouldn't you, Claudia? What's the good of being in *bella Napoli*, as they call it, with two elderly gentlemen to look after one? Couldn't you and I manage to escape, like yonder young woman, and smoke our cigarettes in happy independence?"

"I don't smoke," said the Panther, "though I used to take just the first whiff at dear old Raphael's cigars for him. Papa," she went on—for the two gentlemen were also watching the departing Seraph in petticoats—"have you found out anything about Raphael? Has he arrived here yet?"

"He hadn't inquired for letters when I was at the Post Office this morning. We may as well stroll that way now. He may come at any moment."

But no inquiry had been made. The Seraph had given his father an address simply for certain legal purposes. As his father had reached Naples, he knew that his address was not wanted. And he had no other correspondents. So he went not near the Post Office—and his father was baffled. As, however, he did not wish to lose sight of the old gentleman, in case of anything turning up, he ascertained—it was easy enough—where they lived, and dropped a line to the Panther. It had delighted him to see her so fresh and gay; evidently she had not taken Sir Arthur's death severely to heart. And he was glad to let her know that he forgave her. So he wrote:—

"DEAR CLAUDIA,—I was glad to see you looking well yesterday. (He put *yesterday* to throw her off her scent.) I shall be in this neighbourhood for some time; don't expect to see me, however. If you are about to leave, send a note to me at the *Albergo Reale* in Castellamare; but be discreet—don't inquire for me there—*I have business.* I am glad *you know what* has not spoilt your beauty or quenched your courage. You may show this to Isola if you like; she can keep secrets without asking questions. —Your brother, RAPHAEL."

This note reached Claudia as she and her cousin sat in a bal-

cony looking over the beautiful servile city to the sapphire bay, with the pale cone of Vesuvius on its shore, the sluggish white smoke hiding its outline. Isola was gaily singing—

"Chi non desidera, chi non apprezza,
Del ciel di Napoli tanta dolcezza!"

The Panther started at the well-known handwriting. Raphael's firm bold autograph was very like Henry VIII.'s. She read it through hurriedly. Isola's keen eye marked a blush upon her face. She read it through again slowly; then, looking up, she met Isola's glance and smiled.

"Mayn't I have a love-letter?" she asked gaily.

"Twenty, if you like; but that is not a love-letter."

"You are a witch!"—"Am I? Well, if I may guess, I should say that comes from Raphael."

"You saw the handwriting?"

"No—by St. Januarius, who is the right saint to swear by here, I should think. I guessed it from your looks."

"Then you're a witch," reiterated Claudia, "and I shall be afraid to have you look at me. Would you like to see the letter? It *is* from Raphael." Isola read it.

"Dear old Seraph!" she exclaimed. "Crafty, cunning old Seraph! Fancy his being here and seeing us, and our knowing nothing about it! Well, he *is* clever." That night, as Isola undressed herself in solitude, a sudden thought flashed upon her. There is something very curious in that abrupt electric flash of thought, which brings back some vague idea of the past, giving it shape and meaning. Hazlitt, in his "Table Talk," relates a story of a man, who, prosecuted by government for some political crime, and acquitted, went away into a solitary part of Wales with intent to purge his brain of the sordid horrors of attorneys and spies. After long sojourn with nature, it chanced that one morning a man passed his window: he scarcely noticed him, but all through the day he was miserable, and the unbetraying heart of maternal nature could not console him. He was nervous, fretful, worried; he knew not why. The evening explained; the chance passer whose scarce-noticed face had thus affected him was a hired scoundrel who had borne witness against him at his trial.

This phenomenon is not unlike the sudden revelation from what seems an utter blank of a photographic picture, when mercurial vapour is applied. Few are they who have not often experienced it—as did Isola at this moment, when, brushing her wild wealth of hair, she suddenly felt sure that the handsome Englishwoman in blue serge yachting costume, coolly smoking a cigarette, was Raphael, and none other. Yes; she was absolutely certain. She wondered Claudia had not detected him. She resolved not to say a word—as he evidently desired to lie perdu—but to watch for him in street and square, and act—as the moment might decide.

Vain resolve! Vainly did she keep her keen bright eyes ready

and recognisant. No Seraph! The very next day the whim had seized him to ascertain what had become of Fiordilisa. He knew it was perilous; but peril was pleasure. The Lily of Isola Rossa might be dead of grief—if so, his life was not worth five minutes' purchase. But he would know. After all, the Lily had loved him passionately, and had been loved—pretty well. So he left Mrs. Morfill under the care of Louis, charging her to avoid strangers and keep within Rispoli's gardens and orange groves; and then, with young Columbus for sole comrade, he made for Corsica in his Genoese fishing-boat. But winds and currents were against him; he was driven into the Gulf of Terra Nova in Sardinia; and, leaving his boat there, he made his way across the hills to Longo Sardo. There was no difficulty in crossing to Bonifazio. When he ascended, wearily enough, that inverted pyramid of rock on which the town stands high above the sea, he felt he was again in the very island of romance. They call this rock of Bonifazio the *seventy-second* wonder of the world; but as Raphael Branscombe entered the old fortress gate and looked back at the dizzy steep which he had climbed, and over the straits, golden in the sunset light, he said within himself—"This is the gate of wonder. Through this I enter the realm of romance."

Leaving young Columbus to await his return, he hired horses and a guide, and made straight across the hills for Isola Rossa. It was a glorious ride, but terrible for its toil. Mighty hills, wild rivers, stately forests of chestnut, wondrous views over pale peaks and misty gorges to the cerulean sea beyond; with this wealth of beauty his eye was delighted as he made his resolute way northward. Seldom was there a locanda at which to eat or sleep; but hospitable priests and godlike goatherds gave him their best, and he saw a simple, noble, rude Homeric life. And, leaving his babyish love behind him, Raphael Branscombe had for a while a touch of nobleness, and thought with remorse of his long absence, with joy of again pressing the pure lips of the Lily of Isola Rossa.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BEHIND IN LONDON.

HUMPHREY MORFILL'S wound kept him for some time a prisoner. When he was able to leave the house his sole resolve was to discover what had become of his wife, and to obtain revenge. He had thrown up his Eastern appointment, which indeed could not be kept open for him, requiring instant performance. He threw aside all his occupations, legal and literary, and concentrated all his faculties, and devoted all his time, in order to trace his lost spouse and avenge himself. He was like

an express engine, which, doing its mile a minute from London towards Bristol, is turned by the switches upon another line, and continues with undiminished speed and power away towards Birmingham. The dynamic force which had driven Humphrey Morfill on the path of ambition drove him now with no less velocity on the path of revenge. As soon as he was well enough to move about he restlessly sought the solution of the mystery. He went to detectives, offered heavy rewards, and kept up a perpetual excitement. A good many post-chaises had left London on that fatal Tuesday evening. Among those which Morfill traced was one which took a lady and gentleman, with their servant, to a dull market town on the borders of Wiltshire and Berkshire. The proprietor of the post-chaise did not know the gentleman who hired it, could not remember his personal appearance; the postillions were equally unreminiscent; but Humphrey resolved to follow the scent—as he had done in several previous cases. So he travelled down to the place at which the post-chaise had been dismissed.

Honest stupidity baffles an inquirer more completely than anything else. The landlord of the Bear remembered the early arrival of a post-chaise, and that the lady went to bed for some hours, and that the gentleman hired a trap and went away in it. The conveyance was sent back, but he did not remember who brought it. The gentleman paid like a lord. The lady was very pretty. This was about all that Humphrey could make out of the landlord, landlady, waitress, chambermaid, and ostler.

What was the gentleman like? This was a point on which anybody who had seen the Seraph might be expected to give intelligible evidence. But there are folk who, like the pagan idols, have eyes yet see not. Indeed, the perceptive faculty requires education as much as any other faculty; and there are quite as many people who have no eye as there are who have no ear. Music is the only sensuous art which has been scientifically treated; the eye has loftier functions than the ear, yet there has been no attempt to teach the use of those functions. Do we not see upon the canvas of many a modern painter beings and things which anybody might worship without breaking the second commandment? And if painters paint what they have never seen, nor ever will see, and call it nature, what shall be expected from the ordinary public? If the eye cannot obtain justice, what hope is there for palate or nostril? When, for example, will there be a scientific æsthetic of perfume? When will people learn that musk and lavender water and Ess. Bouquet are quite as nasty as assafœtida? Strong perfumes indicate consciousness of tragus. Wood violets are sweet, smothered up in leaves; and so are the May-lily and the blue-bell; and so—ah, how sweet, yet with how faint and delicate a sweetness!—is the cyclamen.

"Those delicate white leaflets, upward turning—
The perfect odour of that rose-tinged mouth,

Curved eloquently, and for ever yearning
To gain warm kisses from the wooing south;
There is no blossom, theme of poet's pen,
Dowered with like beauty to the cyclamen."

But sweeter than any breath of flower—and more suggestive of delight than the most exquisite bouquet of choicest claret—is the odorous breath of a healthy young girl,

"With red lips breathed apart
By the music of her heart."

As to the æsthetic of taste, that I fear must continue undeveloped, so long as the epicure, poet of the palate, is stigmatised with grossness—so long as

"God sends us good meat, but the devil sends cooks."

Well, thanks to the utter absence of the eye's education, the people at the Bear were entirely at issue among each other as to what manner of man he was who brought thither the beautiful lady in the postchaise. That he was a remarkable man to look upon they all agreed; but the majority held that he was a tall man, rather gigantic, indeed, than otherwise, with a vast quantity of raven-black hair. Humphrey could remember no man of his acquaintance whom this description fitted even loosely. It is to be observed that he had given up his notion of Raphael's being the person he sought, having sagaciously concluded that the Seraph would have candidly confessed what he had done when the matter had led to a hostile meeting between them. And, indeed, he told his second and his surgeon, so soon as his senses returned to him, that he regretted having wronged Mr. Branscombe by his suspicions—a phrase which found its way to the papers.

Humphrey could not discover whither the errant gentleman and lady had driven in that hired conveyance. He explored in all directions, but somehow did not reach the historic town beyond the chalk downs in which Raphael had taken brief rest. So from this journey, as from many before, he returned baffled and disappointed. But the ardour of pursuit was not checked. On the day of his return he dined at the Chandos with Frank Maule. Frank, whose love of difficult inquiry we know, was much interested in this investigation of Morfill's. His opinion, however, differed from Humphrey's in regard to Raphael. He had noticed the Seraph's peculiar tone towards Humphrey, and had inferred that he knew more about Mrs. Morfill than he cared to tell.

"You have done nothing yet," he said, as they waited for dinner.

"Nothing. I went on a fool's errand yesterday, and have come back baffled. I found myself in pursuit of a tall man with a canine mane, black as jet. Do you know any such person?"

"I have heard a curious story to-day," said Maule. "You know Hudson, who married Lady Æmilia Hastings?"

"I don't know him. I have heard of him as immensely rich."

"Awfully. Well, do you know his wife?"

"I saw her once at the opera. She's the Cleopatra style of woman, rather."

"She is. Well, I hear that Hudson came upon a packet of letters showing that she was on too intimate terms before her marriage with Raphael Branscombe, and that she has not renounced her intimacy."—"By Jove!"

"That's not all. Some of this correspondence showed that the old Countess found out the affair, and that she afterwards, and in consequence, pushed on the marriage. Now the old lady is dead; and, if she did what is said of her, why——but there, it's no good to speculate. What I hear is that Hudson used the old lady's name very freely, not to say foully—that Shottesbrooke heard of it—and that they're going to fight to-morrow morning."

"Do you think you are well informed?"

"It reached me through Aylmer, who is very intimate with Shottesbrooke, and who is to be his second. You know what sort of fellow the young Earl is?"—"No."

"Then I'll tell you. I don't know another man like him. He is a child in purity, a Bayard in courage, almost a Christ in pitifulness. He is spotless, if any man ever was. He is only two or three-and-twenty, but far older men who know him reverence him. And for him to be mixed up in so vile an affair!"

"What will he do, think you?"

"Meet Hudson, of course; that first. If he survives, I should predict that he will follow Raphael Branscombe"——

"To the death!" said Morfill fiercely.

"I don't know. I am not sure that he would deem that right. We shall see."

"Branscombe is an infernal scoundrel," said Morfill after a pause. "I wish I had shot him!"

"Why? What quarrel have *you* with him?"

"None, of course, but he deserves to be shot. If he meets the young Earl, he'll surely kill him. He's a fiend, I think. Why should he have provoked me that day, instead of saying in a straightforward way that he knew nothing of my wife?"

Frank Maule leaned back in his chair, and reflected. Should he tell Morfill his suspicion—a suspicion so strong that it almost amounted to certainty? Why not? Morfill could not *again* challenge Raphael; all he could do was to search for his wife.

"*Could* he say that?" he asked at length. Morfill half rose from his chair.

"Why shouldn't he? What do you know?" he exclaimed.

"I know nothing. I merely think that Raphael Branscombe is your man, from the way he talked to you that night. Does he dislike you? Has he any reason to dislike you?"

"He intended to marry his cousin—my wife, you know, for her money."

"Ah," said Maule, "then that supplies a motive. He may

have taken away your wife, less from love of her, than from hatred of you. That would be his disposition, if I am any judge." Morfill struck the table with his clenched fist.

"By God!" he exclaimed, "I believe you're right. Where is he? I'll find him, by Heaven!"

"Quiet, my dear fellow—quiet!" said Maule.

Their colloquy had been carried on in the lowest possible tone of voice, and Humphrey's sudden excitement called attention to the remote table at which they sat.

"It will be a very strange thing," said Frank Maule after a pause, "if we cannot discover what has become of so well-known a man as Raphael Branscombe. We'll make inquiry this very evening. If my theory is right, you have only to overtake him in order to find Mrs. Morfill. But don't be hasty. You know he has fought you once."

"He is a liar!" said Humphrey. "I'll murder him."

"My dear Morfill, don't give way to excitement. Of course I know you have been very badly treated, and that it is difficult to keep cool; but depend upon it, if you *can* be cool, it will give you an immense advantage. However, let us devote the evening to inquiry."

This was done, but at first with no satisfactory result. They ascertained that Raphael had left England, but could not discover in what direction. It was pretty clear, however, that he had left England alone. This was perplexing. Frank Maule was a man by no means disposed to give up an inquiry because it was difficult. Indeed, this gave a keenness to the edge of his desire, and caused him to become more fertile in suggestions. And at last, after they had made many legitimate experiments—and the night was growing late—and Humphrey Morfill was becoming surly and savage—and Frank himself was feeling deucedly tired of the whole affair—it suddenly occurred to him to visit a certain quarter of London where you and I, decorous reader, have never spent an hour, and where indeed life is at this period far slower than it was in the days of the Marquis of Waterford. And in that piquant pooh-pooh purlieu—that florid fi-fi field of flash and fancy—they encountered a little bird. A very pretty little bird, exquisite of shape, brilliant of plumage, with the sweetest beak and greediest claws in the world, with a marvellous thirst for fizz. And this gay wild-winged creature, of a species unknown to Audubon and Wilson, chirped and carolled musical news of the Seraph. And the burden of that news was—"*Bella Napoli!*"

"I shall go over at once," said Morfill.

"I'll go with you," said Frank Maule, "if you'll wait till to-morrow. I've no particular occupation at present."

"Wait till to-morrow!" exclaimed Humphrey. "You didn't expect me to start for the coast at once, surely."

"Well, I don't know. You seemed rather impetuous. How-

ever, I really will go with you, and to-morrow we shall perhaps have another comrade."—"What do you mean?"

"Why, whether Shottesbrooke kills Hudson or Hudson Shottesbrooke, the survivor will surely look after Branscombe. And there is no time to be lost."

The character which Frank Maule had given of the young Earl of Shottesbrooke was no exaggeration. He was the fair ideal of a Christian gentleman—or rather would have been, if Froissart had written a fifth gospel. There was a certain gentlemanly monarch of the United Kingdom (thank God, he was not King of England) of whom a poet wrote—

> "A noble nasty course he ran,
> Supremely filthy and fastidious,
> He was the world's first gentleman,
> And made the appellation hideous."

Not such sort of gentleman was Lord Shottesbrooke. He was the Sir Galahad of the nineteenth century. Boy though he was, his native purity made his intellectual eyesight keen, and he judged character more truly than many an experienced man of the world. Knavery marvelled to find itself fathomed of this lordly child. I have called the young Earl a Christian gentleman. This, of a surety, he was. But he was a knight—in the highest sense of that glorious monosyllable. Sir Philip Sidney would have welcomed him as a true brother-in-arms. Cowardice, dishonour, falsehood, were things to him unimaginable. He was chivalry's noblest product.

Conceive, dear reader, what I cannot describe—the grief and shame of this young nobleman when the conviction was forced upon him that his sister had been false to her husband—ay, and more, and infinitely worse, that her fair fame had been soiled in her maidenhood, and that her dead mother was her accomplice! My God, how cold the words look as I write them—mending my pen, mayhap, in the midst of a sentence! How would Shakespeare have given to such an awful situation eternity with his words of fire and blood? The truest gentleman alive—to whom the least thought of dishonour was torture unutterable—to be told that his sister was ——, that his dead mother was ——. No, I will not write the words of infamy. That night—the night, I mean, when Humphrey Morfill and Frank Maule sought for some trace of Raphael Branscombe, and found one at length—that night Edward, eleventh Earl of Shottesbrooke, boy as he was, and fortunate boy as most men would deem him, knelt down and prayed God that Hudson's bullet might kill him next morning.

"*If it be possible, let this cup pass from me!*" That was the burden of his prayer. Better death—better to sacrifice the love and break the heart of a beautiful young girl to whom he was betrothed—better to resign his high hope of doing service to England, as ten gallant earls, his forefathers, had done, than to live

with the knowledge that his mother and his sister had done such deeds as men attributed to them. But the morning came, and with it the chill uncomfortable meeting. The Earl felt neither nervous nor bloodthirsty; he longed for death, and felt a definite presentiment that what he longed for would not come. It would be hard to say how he felt towards the man whom he had challenged—his sister's husband. By no means inclined to kill him, certainly. Possibly Mr. Hudson felt similarly towards his brother-in-law—for both men fired in the air. And when the affair was over, and Brabazon Aylmer was going to take his principal off the ground, that young nobleman walked across to Hudson, and said—"George, shake hands. I don't know how this affair will end. I wish I had been dead before it began. But it cannot end here. We must find that man who has brought us so much misery and shame. He must not escape."

"I don't know, my lord," said Hudson plaintively. "I don't think he *is* a man. I look upon him as a fiend."

"Where is he? What has become of him?" inquired the Earl.

"I wish I knew!" exclaimed Hudson.

"I think I know where he is," said the Earl's second, Brabazon Aylmer.—"How so?" said the Earl.

"Simply thus:—Frank Maule knew of this business. He came to my rooms at about three this morning, and said, 'You will want, in an hour or two, to know where Branscombe is. He is at Naples.'"—"How did he know?"

"Hudson called Branscombe a fiend just now," said Aylmer. "He spoke truth. You are not the only men who are in keen pursuit of him. Only last night was it discovered where he had gone, and the first vessel will take a resolute avenger in search of him. God knows by whose hand he will first meet punishment."

"I'll tell you what," said Hudson, "from all I have seen and heard of that man, I believe no one of us will punish him. However, let us make trial. How soon can we start for Naples?"

A curious conversation after a meeting at Chalk Farm. Its result was that Lord Shottesbrooke and Hudson joined Morfill and Maule in their expedition. A week later the four gentlemen were to be seen in the pleasant, lazy streets of the Siren City, Parthenope, though assuredly without any ideas in their heads of either laziness or pleasure. Inquiries soon led them to the palazzo in the Strada Monte di Dio, where the Branscombes had taken up their quarters. Their cards were sent up one languid morning, when the ladies were lying on couches and watching the magical movement of the slow Vesuvian smoke.

"Four Englishmen!" exclaimed the Panther, scrutinising those polished parallelograms. "'Lord Shottesbrooke'—ah, he's a nice fellow; but he's engaged to Gerard Morley's daughter, so he's no good. 'Hudson'—there are so many Hudsons—oh, this must be the one that married Shottesbrooke's sister. 'Maule'—don't

know him. 'Morfill'—know *him*, rather. What can bring *him* here, Isola?"

"I'm sure I can't imagine," replied that young lady indolently. "Ask him. I suppose you're going to let them come up by and by."

They were admitted, and Maule, as the most collected of the party, explained that they had expected to find Mr. Raphael Branscombe at the Palazzo. Would he be in soon?

"If you could answer the question you have asked," replied the Panther, "we should be much obliged to you. Papa came over to Naples purposely to meet Raphael, who said he would be here, and nothing has been heard of him. He is very erratic in his movements, and, I suppose, has altered his mind."

Humphrey Morfill decided at once that Claudia was uttering falsehood. There was a sullen gleam in his eye that told of this.

The other three looked doubtful. Lord Shottesbrooke had yet to learn that it was possible for a lady to lie, he therefore believed—and wondered. Hudson simply wondered. Frank Maule renewed his questionings. Isola looked from one to another of the group with a perplexity in those marvellous eyes of hers. She alone knew that she had seen Raphael in Naples. She wondered why these four men were anxious to discover him. She wondered why he chose to hide from them.

"Perhaps they think he's afraid of them," she thought scornfully. "They don't know the Seraph. I guess he's amusing himself, and don't choose to be interrupted." Her conjecture was not a wild one, as we know. Presently Devil Branscombe and the old Wolf returned from their stroll, and from lounging at the Caffè d'Europa.

"Friends of Raphael's, eh?" said Ralph Branscombe. "I can't make out what's become of him. He wrote to say he should be here, for there were some legal documents he expected to have to sign. I have been able to hear nothing of him from post office or passport people. And I have already stayed here rather longer than I intended, because, if I miss him, I don't know when I may find him again. He wanders all over the world."

The four visitors could see that this was the truth.

"Won't you, gentlemen, dine with us?" said the Wolf hospitably. "We can't give you an English dinner, you know, but our cook shall do her best."

"Thank you," said the young Earl, "unfortunately it is impossible. I wish it were otherwise."

They took leave. As they walked to their hotel, Maule remarked—"They evidently have no idea where Raphael Branscombe is. We can do nothing with them. We must wait."

"He is expected here," said the Earl.

"I was not quite satisfied with the woman's looks," said Morfill. "I fancy the little one, at least, knows something."

"What can we do now?" asked Hudson despairingly.

"Play a waiting game," answered Maule. "Our quarry will

turn up where the rest of the brood are. Of course it isn't as easy for you to be patient, with your passionate interest in the quest, as for me, who regard it as a simple scientific problem. There is the more reason that you should put yourselves in my hands." Frank Maule quite enjoyed his captaincy. He had three men to keep in order, all as different as possible. He had very little idea as to what would happen when they ran down their foe. But he deemed it his duty to keep his men well in hand, and was quite determined that neither of them should do anything premature or rash, if he could help it.

"What did those four fellows want of Raphael?" growled the old Wolf on their departure. "They seemed devilish anxious to find him."

"If they want anything he don't like, they'll be devilish anxious to get away again, when they do find him," said Devil Branscombe.

"I suppose," remarked Claudia to Isola, as those two young ladies, with true Parthenopean laziness and languor, were loitering through their preparation for dinner—"I suppose those men have got some awkward business with Raphael. It looked like it."

"Very much," said Isola. "Let's hope they mayn't find him."

"Why?" inquired the Panther. "You don't suppose he'd be afraid of them—four to one even?"

"Not a bit of it. I meant—*for their sakes.*"

And emitting one of those silvery laughs of hers, Isola indulged in a pirouette that shook all her curls like the leaves of a birch tree tossed by the west wind, and then announced herself ready for dinner. It was not unconducive to the merriment of her young heart—the idea that, Raphael being at Naples, Stephen Langton must be somewhere near. How wrong she was!

CHAPTER XXXII.

FAUST AND MEPHISTOPHELES.

WE are all tempters and all tempted, I suppose, in this world. Sometimes we play Mephistopheles—sometimes Faust. Goethe's separation of the two characters is both unscientific and unpoetic—because untrue. We have demonstrated the non-existence of devils. We have "dismissed hell with costs." We have found out that the true seat of evil is man's heart, man's soul, man's *self.* Moloch was a child to Nana Sahib; Belial an ass to George IV.; Mammon a muff to Rothschild; while Satan himself—the Arch-Rebel—the very antagonist of God—sinks into insignificance beside Napoleon.

Ay, in the core of man is the seat of evil. But thank God, it is also the seat of good. And the race which has given us Philip Sidney, and Collingwood, and Charles Napier, may defy the

devils. That theory of external influence is absurd. That it could ever have obtained has always perplexed me. The wisest utterance of any living man is Matthew Arnold's—

"We mortal millions live *alone*."

This is the true key to the knowledge of humanity, if such knowledge be obtainable, which I doubt. But that any man, knowing himself, or making any conscientious attempt to know himself, should honestly believe in the existence of evil influences *outside* himself, is to me perfectly astounding.

"The world, the flesh, the devil." Those three. Verily there have been sermons enough about them since somebody (Paul, was it?) thus classified the antichristian influences. Well, let us look at them. What is the world? Simply and solely the agglomeration of men and women—Thackeray's "Vanity Fair," Tom Robertson's "Society." Nothing more. Shun the world, exclaims Ecclesiastes. How? A meeting of Quakers and Quakeresses is —the world. Let the five wisest virtuousest men that ever lived sup with the five wise virgins (if there ever were so many) and you have—the world.

What is the flesh? Humph! Inquire of the poets and novelists. Is there a rhyme or a story worth reading that hasn't love in it. If so, for the love of Heaven let me have a copy, that I may imitate it. But, say you, that's all fiction; take the history of the world. Well, take it. Women have the making of it. Never was there a great glory or a great mischief without a woman at the heart of it. I don't believe the Siege of Troy was exactly a myth. After all, however, what we call history reflects a very, very small portion of human life. The enormous mass of action which is never recorded would, if it were possible to investigate it, show the influence of "the flesh." And why should it not have influence? Preach as ye will, eloquent and emasculate theologians, a beautiful woman will, to the end of time, make havoc with the hearts of men; nor will a man in whom intellectual and physical power and beauty meet be without influence over what it is the custom to call the hearts of women.

As to "the devil"—well, this must be deemed a theologico-poetic invention. When passion becomes madness, when the forces at work in the breast of man or woman are so potent, so furious, as to astound the average animal, the average animal naturally imagines some external power. Hence the devil gets the credit of thoughts and actions which lie beyond the common level of human nature. If he cares about reputation or renown he ought to be greatly obliged to us all. However, Stephen Langton had read "Faust," and was too young to entertain ideas like these, which never come to a man till he is thirty-five, or to a woman at all: and so he ascribed Mephistophelean influence to Raphael Branscombe. And, a great believer in dreams and destiny, he thought there was something "uncanny" in his suddenly and unexpect-

edly encountering the Seraph on that coral-reddened sea-sand of Isola Rossa. He had fled from England and thrown himself upon Seagull Palliser, simply for the purpose of escaping from the Branscombes, with whom he had inextricably involuntarily been connected from his boyhood. And at Ajaccio he is accosted by Raphael Branscombe's wife; and at Isola Rossa, when he lands with that lady on the beach, he finds himself face to face with Raphael Branscombe himself! You know if a fellow met with that sort of thing in a novel he'd say it was perfectly absurd.

Stephen, whose visionary tendencies were the very growth of his nature, was much impressed by the coincidence. It appeared to him as if it was impossible for him to escape from the influence of this strange family. He began to think he had better not try. He pined to be free; he longed to find real work to do in the world; above all, he longed with all the strength of a poetic nature, for that which he had more than once so nearly gained—so narrowly lost—a woman's love. A true woman's true love, Stephen wanted. Not much to want, you may say.

Not much! Worth more than the empire of the universe, physical or intellectual. Better to be truly loved by a true woman than to be Cæsar or Shakespeare. That opens another question. What is the good of having such love if you cannot appreciate it? Cæsar or Shakespeare *would* probably—and have all their other gifts into the bargain. I fancy those Sonnets of Shakespeare's mean the very hottest fire of love—that fire which scorches the moist marrow in the strong bones of men.

Let us return to our muttons—to Raphael and Stephen, pacing the sands of Isola Rossa, at eventide, when the sapphire sea was a vision, and the saffron sunset a lyric, and the soft susurrus of the sweet South a breath from paradise. What explanation Raphael had made to Angelo and Fiordilisa I know not. He was plausible enough. Fiordilisa believed him thoroughly, of course. With her, as with all loving women, love had trust as a companion. She had never for an instant doubted Raphael. He might be dead, wounded, in prison—he could not be false. What a pity, you may say, that such faith should be wasted on such falsehood! Not so. Better far to have loved and trusted and been ruthlessly betrayed than never to have loved at all. Even Angelo Montalti seemed at last to accept Raphael Branscombe's explanations, but there was an occasional look of the old Corsican's which the keen-eyed Seraph noticed, and did not approve. I have never been able to learn whether Angelo returned to its casket that ivory-hafted dagger.

Raphael and Stephen, then, were pacing the shore. They had dined at the Casa Montalti in the enjoyable primæval style, which made Stephen think of the *Odyssey*. They had drunk some of Angelo's oldest and choicest wine, and followed it with coffee of Mocha, and rare liqueurs from Raphael's Piccadilly wine merchant. They were now smoking placidly, and watching the

multitudinous colours with which the departing chariot of Hyperion dyed the ruddy cliffs and snowy sands and emerald sea. Stephen was poetic in mood—quoting some rhyme, the product of the day.

> "We talk of Thetis and Oceanus—
> Myths of old Time. The songs melodious
> Of Grecian years, the Graybeard, as he passes
> On to the unknown end,
> Doth with new meanings blend,
> We Goths have changed the gods of the old Greek faith
> to gases."

"Goths, indeed!" exclaimed the Seraph. "Never saidst thou a truer word. I'm a Greek, at any rate. I don't substitute oxygen, hydrogen, azote—a chemical trinity—for Zeus and Poseidon and Aidoneus. I believe, if I had been an Argonaut, Thetis with the silver foot would have preferred me to Peleus. But it's too late unluckily." They were silent for a turn or two.

"Where's Palliser gone with his yacht?" asked Raphael after a pause.

"He talked of running over to Naples," said Stephen. "He'll be back in two or three days, and then I must proceed on my Odyssey."

"Look here, old fellow. I want you to do me a favour. I have left some matters to be settled in Sardinia, where I came from last. Now will you stay here till I return? It will only be a few days. You can keep Palliser, I know."

"When shall you start?" asked Stephen.

"Oh, I'll go to-morrow. I wouldn't go at all if I could help it—but I have left things that positively must be attended to."

This was a fact, we know. There was young Columbus waiting for him at Bonifazio—and his boat at Terranova—and Anne Page under Louis's care at the Hotel Rispoli. There were four men waiting for him at Naples too—but that he knew not. However, it was clearly requisite for him to make some less temporary arrangement for Mrs. Morfill, before he settled down quietly in Corsica—which, strange to say, had become his intention. Yes, it was so. The Seraph had at last discovered the infinite value of a pure love. The miserable method of his life hitherto began to strike him as contemptibly foolish. He would have given a good deal not to have embarrassed himself with Mrs. Morfill. He despised her. He despised himself for having been such a confounded ass as to run away with her, chiefly to annoy her husband. Why should he want revenge on the man? He ought to have felt infinitely obliged to him for taking so commonplace a woman off his hands. When he compared her with Fiordilisa—that creature so pure, so poetic, so utterly incapable of imagining falsehood or understanding vileness—he absolutely shuddered at the idea that he had made himself responsible for Mrs. Morfill.

And there was another thing which came very strongly upon

him. Not long, and Fiordilisa would be a mother. Not long, and he would have a child to succeed him as head of the long line of Branscombes of Branscombe. A son, as fearless and acute as himself, as truthful and loving as Fiordilisa! How he would love such a boy!—how nobly might such a Branscombe atone for the faults and follies of his forefathers. Or a daughter, mayhap; well, a daughter like Fiordilisa would be a good gift from God. So thought the Seraph; and so thinking, he made immediate resolve to return to Sorrento, to make some arrangement for the wellbeing of the woman with whom he had foolishly incumbered himself, and then to return to Isola Rossa, to Fiordilisa, to the only home and the only love he had ever known. Thus resolved, he induced Stephen to promise to remain at the Casa Montalti till his return. And when he announced to old Angelo the necessity for his going to Sardinia, and possibly to the Continent for a few days, so obviously sincere was his regret at leaving, so joyful his hope of return, that the noble old Corsican began to accuse himself of entertaining wrongful suspicions of his loyalty.

As to Fiordilisa, that darling of the island of romance heard joyfully of his intention to depart, because when he returned he was to return *for ever*. No more severance—till the Death Angel came to sunder for a time the bonds of love. The thought filled her with perfect happiness. And when the *Fantasia* was made ready, with Marc Antonio as his comrade, to take him round to Bonifazio—while, as often heretofore, all the dwellers in the little town turned out to see him off—Fiordilisa clung to him with a loving kiss, and whispered—"Come back soon, Raffaelle: *you know why.*" What joy sparkled in the divine depths of her eyes as she said these words!

So away went the *Fantasia*, light almost as the foam, with Raphael on board—carrying, for the first time, I believe, in his life, a noble resolve in his heart. Mephistopheles had broken down in his part, that was quite clear. The *Fantasia* brought the Seraph to Ajaccio first, and thence to Bonifazio. There, having found young Columbus, he dismissed Marc Antonio. And retracing the precise route by which he had arrived, he found himself at Sorrento once more—at the Hôtel Rispoli—with Sweet Anne Page. And—with a problem to solve. A difficult problem, such as men have not usually to solve many times in a lifetime. A problem that would utterly throw into the shade some of the diabolical problems which my mathematical tutor had the cruel iniquity to base on the fifth and sixth books of that unutterable scoundrel, *Euclid*. Have you ever been asked, gentle reader, "to construct a right-angled triangle, having given the sum of the base and perpendicular, and the sum of the base and hypothenuse," or to prove that "there can be only five regular solids," or to "find a point such that tangents drawn from it to touch two given circles shall contain a given angle?" Let me hope that you have not. I *have*. I am not at all likely to forget it.

However, the Seraph's problem transcended this. It was: How to get rid of Anne Page and return quietly to the Lily of Isola Rossa. An amazing problem. For, to begin with, the Seraph was a man not to be missed from the London horizon without some effort on the part of friends and associates to trace him to his hiding place. He had exactly the popularity you might expect. He had the two great elements of popularity. He was lovable—he was dangerous. How could a man both lovable and dangerous vanish utterly from the ken of all who loved and feared him without being missed—without being pursued by the fiery fierceness of both enemies and friends?

Then, in the next place, there was poor little Anne to dispose of. How to do that? This puzzled Raphael considerably while on his voyage from Terranova to Sorrento. The child loved him—that was the worst of it. She had surrendered her life for him. And the new feeling—utterly new to him—which had sprung up in his heart for Fiordilisa, made him unwilling to act cruelly to the foolish child, whom he had brought to Sorrento, taking her away from her husband. What was he to do with her? That was the great question of the moment—a question almost unanswerable. It occupied him all through his pleasant voyage from Isola Rossa to Ajaccio, from Ajaccio to Bonifazio, from Bonifazio across the enchanted straits. Equally did it occupy him from Terranova to Sorrento. What could he do with her? Here was a beautiful little creature, in whom (as if she were an Undine) he had awakened a soul—whom he had severed from the highly respectable world wherein she lived, and from all the duties of her life, and who now lived upon his love, and obeyed him as if he were a god, and thought of nothing but him; and it was his especial object to get rid of her. Why, myriads of men would be delighted to find themselves in his position—in the position whence he chiefly desired to escape. What to do with the foolish child whom, in a foolish freak, he had taken from her home? That was the point. It perplexed him. But never for a moment did he falter in his resolve quietly to get rid of her.

Though, be it observed, the strong love which had filled his heart for Fiordilisa made him very pitiful towards Anne. Heartily did he wish he had never enticed her away from that grim dull quiet Mesopotamian terrace. Heartily did he wish there was some magical way of restoring her to her stupid clever lawyer-husband without *fracas* or *esclandre*. It could not be. He must ust accept his fate with all its annoyances. Raphael had all his life been accepting his fate. He had never hesitated, whether woman or man was in the way. His creed had been something like this—

> "My want's at the worst, so why should I spare
> (Since just such a thing my want supplies)
> This little girl with the silky hair,
> And the love in her two large eyes?"

The Seraph, I have said, had never shrunk from accepting his

fate. He would have gone with imperturbable coolness to an interview with either Satan or Aphrodite. But his mind was changed, the poetry of his life had come. He had set his heart on this beautiful little Corsican, divinely pure. I don't know that the man was permanently changed. Leopards and Ethiopians are proverbially difficult. Anyway he had found out that there is such a thing as love; and when this discovery is for the first time made by a man who is physically and mentally above the common level of men—by a man who has had his experiences, and knows the world, and has arrived at a mature age—it generally has a disturbing effect. I assure you it disturbed our friend the Seraph. He was, I think, for the first time in his life sorely perplexed. You see, he had always been a decidedly clever amateur actor in the amorous comedy—or even tragedy of life. But he was now in a new position. For the first time the thing was *real.* He really loved this little Corsican; this had brought him back to her, contrary to the guidance of that extremely common sense which ordinarily ruled his actions; this had determined him to get rid of this poor foolish child whom he had taken away from her husband, whatever might happen—and the love which he bore towards Fiordilisa filled him with pity for the woman whom he had determined to desert. Well, Raphael Branscombe reached the Hôtel Rispoli at Sorrento, where I may at present leave him for a while to settle affairs with Mrs. Morfill. Meanwhile, as we have noticed, Seagull Palliser had run across to the Continent for a cruise, and had looked in at Naples. It was hardly to be expected that he should enter that pleasant city without encountering Englishmen. Of course he encountered those four Englishmen who were searching for Raphael Branscombe.

But Seagull Palliser, though rather a hare-brained young yachtsman, was not a man to betray a friend. He could not be long in the company of Lord Shottesbrooke, Humphrey Morfill, George Hudson—to say nothing of Frank Maule—without discovering that they sought Raphael Branscombe, and sought him with hostile intent. He found out quickly enough that Raphael was presumed to have taken away Morfill's wife. He wasn't the sort of man to care much about anybody's wife. He saw there was a row brewing; he had heard enough of the Seraph to be sure he could take his own part in the row; he thought the best thing he could do was to return to Isola Rossa and warn him. So after enjoying a pleasant day or two in Naples, and after having had several confabulations with Frank Maule, who saw clearly that Palliser knew something of Raphael, but could not find out what, our yachtsman started again for Corsica. *Too late.* These two monosyllables come with diabolic frequency into a life history. Raphael was gone. Palliser confided to Stephen Langton all that he had learnt. Stephen was perfectly astounded. Of course he was aware that his little sweetheart of childhood—the baby beauty of Idlechester—was quite ready to run away with

Raphael. But he fancied the Seraph was too honourable—or, if not, too pitiful—thus to ruin her life. He could not understand the position of affairs. If he had really taken her away, where was she now? There must be some mistake.

Stephen Langton saw that Raphael truly loved Fiordilisa. It was the real thing—unmistakable. And he naturally supposed—as who would not?—that this love had existed from the moment of their marriage. This being so, he could not imagine that Raphael would have taken away Morfill's wife, notwithstanding that young lady's obvious infatuation. So he concluded there was some mistake, and told Seagull Palliser that such must be the case, wherein the young yachtsman cordially agreed with him. Unluckily it happened that among the crew of the *Seagull* there was a man of inquisitive tendencies. This was the steward, or chief of the commissariat. He was a capital fellow, for his especial business. He was utterly incapable both of swindling his employer, and of permitting him to be swindled. He was honesty incarnate. He was too astute for the innumerable cheats of all nations, by whom a generous English wanderer is customarily fleeced. He saved Seagull Palliser no end of money. He was a capital linguist (unusual among Scotchmen), and could hold his own with most men in most languages. One fault had Ralph Ramsay—he was desperately inquisitive. Not a fault, rather a virtue, up to a certain point, in a man holding his position. What yachtsman would not rejoice in a steward who always managed to find out everything important to be known in the way of "what to eat, drink, and avoid," wherever the saucy *Seagull* lay at anchor? Infinitely useful is such a man. But Ralph Ramsay's inquisitiveness did not stop at this point. He had a mania—a hunger—nay, a thorough *thirst* for gossip; a thirst comparable to that which a man feels who has breakfasted on Yarmouth bloaters, lunched on anchovy toast, prepared himself for dinner with a little Russian caviar, and drunk nothing. I remember learning from the dear old grammar of Eton this adage, which probably occurs in the works of some Roman poet:—

"Percontatorem fugito, nam garrulus idem est."

Neither King Solomon nor my friend Mr. Martin Farquhar Tupper ever said anything truer. And the cautiously inquisitive man is often the most dangerous babbler—for the which there be sound philosophic reasons. I need not investigate these reasons at present. Suffice it to say, that this inquisitive Scotchman brought to Isola Rossa news which caused rather an effervescence in that pleasant Corsican town. How that news reached Angelo Montalti, who can say? It did reach him, and the result was his sudden disappearance, without much attempt to account for it. The *Fantasia* had taken the Seraph to Bonifazio, but there was another boat in the bay, the *Jesus and Mary*, and in this did Angelo Montalti voyage to the Continent, merely telling his

darling daughter that he had business in Naples. And he told the truth. *He had business in Naples.* Those who know anything of the Corsican temperament are aware that such business as Angelo Montalti deemed he had to transact with Raphael Branscombe would be very decisive business indeed. And those who have made anything like an acquaintance with my friend the Seraph must be aware that it will be rather an awkward affair if he and Angelo should meet with definite purposes of hostility and hatred. Which island would you back, England or Corsica?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PADDING—AND CONFESSION.

I AM at present waiting for my publisher to inform me how nearly I have approached the end of my book. You see, I have not the slightest idea of giving the public too much for their money. My literary tendencies are peculiar. I am, to begin with, horribly lazy. I never use two words when one will do. But, till I promised to fill a given number of pages with romance, I had no idea in the world of the awful bore of occupying space. I found that my laziness improved my style. Saying things briefly, I somehow said them well. Consequently I have got into a charming habit of brevity and terseness; and, if the romance of your three-volume novel were to be compressed into a number of the *Owl*, here is a writer who would back himself to do it. Passion and power do not require time or space. If you blow a man's brains out, the result is merely—a red blot. I confess that I have the greatest difficulty in the world in making my story the proper length for that æsthetic hydra, the British Public. Not that *I* care for the British Public, mind you—as mere critics—even though my publisher possibly may. No; but I care for them as appreciative friends. I don't care twopence for your critical opinion, dear reader, of this absurd story; but if you, being a woman, can with any pleasure read it at some vacant moment when absence of living pleasure makes all literature seem like weak cold tea, or if you, being a man, can kick off your boots in front of the fire, and light a cigar or (better!) a pipe, and read a chapter or two without yawning, and honestly say, "Well, I rather like this fellow!" then I shall be satisfied. To tell the truth, I don't care about the opinion, even of the best and fairest critics, of my literary powers. I think I know their value. As a poet, I am below Browning in insight, above him in lyrical powers, and a trifle above Tennyson in both. As a novelist, I am less successful than Thackeray, because I take less pains, but far superior to your Trollopes or Wilkie Collinses.

Having made these statements, in which, I need not say, there

is not the slightest touch of egöism, I may proceed to remark that my chief desire is to find readers who will read me in friendly fashion. I like friendly readers—fellows who will take one's novel easily with their cigars, and make allowance for the abominable nuisance which it is to have to write at all. If, now, one could only concentrate one's effects! If people would only be satisfied with brief and intense pictures of character, with incidents of the most original and amazing kind, following each other with as much rapidity as you please, it would be satisfactory. If one might issue blank pages to fill the interstices between the incidents, it would save a world of trouble. But, alas and alack, the garrulous few cannot somehow or other fill up those wide spaces between incident and incident. You have no idea, dear reader, what an ineffable bore it becomes. For example, it is a chill December night. A friend of mine has just come back from Sweden, full of information concerning the habits of the dwellers in that Lilliputian kingdom. He is ripe for talk, and pleasant to listen to, and a nice chorus of petticoats surrounds him and extracts his racy stories, while I am obliged to sit in a remote corner of the vast saloon, and plod wearily away at this chapter. Terrible fate of the novelist!

And I am on the very verge of a precipice. I find myself as the representative of a whole host of characters—the Seraph, the Panther, Devil Branscombe, the Wolf, the Wolf's delicious daughter, Sweet Anne Page, Æmilia and her jealous husband, the Bayard-Earl of Shottesbrooke, and I forget whom else—urged forward, as if in a dream, to the brink of a perpendicular cliff falling sheer to the sea. As if in a dream, all these people press forward to that dizzy verge, and I am in advance of them. As if in a dream I wave them back, telling them that the supreme moment has not arrived, that they must not rush upon their fate, that the destinies though sure are slow, that the *dénoûement* is not yet to descend upon us—that, in fact, there is this diabolical chapter of padding to be written before any action can occur.

Padding! What do you mean, critics, by objecting to it? Isn't the catalogue of ships padding? What do you say to this?

> "Peneleus, Prothoënor, Leitus,
> (These are the captains and the ships they led),
> Arcesilaüs, and brave Colonius,
> Mid their Bœotian followers ranked as head.
> From Hyria they and rocky Aulis sped,
> From Schoinos, Eteonus' woodland knees;
> From Scolos, Graia, and the plain outspread
> Of Mycalessus, Thisbe near the seas,
> Where the divine doves haunt the Heliconian trees."

This is the inimitable Philip Stanhope Worsley's rendering of Homer. Now, why shouldn't I catalogue with similar determination all the inhabitants of Isola Rossa, and every one of them

is as much or as little concerned in the issue of my story as was that unlucky Prothoënor (killed by a crowd of Hectors) in the rape and recovery of Helen? One can imagine the son of Panthoüs taking a glass of absinthe in some million-columned cafe in wide-streeted Troy—which I have always thought was a kind of Asian Paris—and laughing over that plusquam-Bœotian leader of the Bœotians whom he had slain in a quarrel not his own.

However, to leave Troy alone—though I wonder whether Helen read novels by a female author, a præ-Homeric Miss Braddon, while awaiting the return of Alexander, it must be admitted that you and I, gentle reader, have arrived at rather a difficult position in reference to our *dramatis personæ*. You are, naturally, much less interested in the affair than I. To you it may possibly not have occurred that these are real people of whom you have been reading—or trying to read. You may say: "Oh, there never were such people! Devil Branscombe's a myth; the Seraph is an absurdity; the Panther is impossible; the Wolf is a character from some stale melodrama." It never occurs to you that I know all these people—all at least who were left alive when my romance came to an end—I cannot pretend to give you their present addresses. Inquire of Lord Stanley of Alderley, who lives somewhere near Alderley Edge.

However I, who know or knew all these people, am anxious to bring them in an easy and artistic manner to the inevitable crisis which I have foreseen ever since I began the chronicle of Stephen Langton's boyhood and Anne Page's babyhood. And I perceive that the crisis cannot long be retarded. Raphael Branscombe is hurrying back to Sorrento (did you see my old friend Naftel's picture thereof?) in order, in some way or other, to get quit of my heroine, Sweet Anne Page. Across the most beautiful of bays there watch for him three men who seek revenge, led by a fourth who seeks nothing of the sort, but regards the pursuit as of scientific interest. Hudson and Lord Shottesbrooke follow him to avenge Lady Æmilia—Morfill to revenge his wife. The presence of a whole group of Branscombes in the city of Naples rather increases the chances against the Seraph. And then, in Isola Rossa itself, there is one more dangerous still. Angelo Montalti has gathered from Ramsay's story sufficient to revive his ancient thirst for vendetta.

Stephen Langton was sore perplexed when he heard of Angelo's disappearance. He too surely felt that it had a sinister meaning. But all that he could do was to remain and console Fiordilisa, who at this moment needed the tenderest care. Our good friend Stephen did not know who was most to be pitied for involuntary connection with the Branscombes, the beautiful Corsican or himself. She, it was clear to him, on the verge of giving an heir to the wild race, was also on the verge of a terrible tragedy. He did not know what to make of the Seraph's departure and Montalti's rapid movement so soon after; but he could not help con-

necting them. Something was about to happen, it was clear. His visionary temperament felt the electric throb of events.

As to himself, it was really too bad. I think everybody will agree with him. He had put himself on board the *Seagull*, Palliser's yacht, on purpose to avoid the whole clan of Branscombes, and here he was left in charge of Raphael's wife, while Raphael went—no one knew whither. It was a deal too bad.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE EARL IN PURSUIT.

"WHAT *can* have become of Raphael?" said the Panther one morning, as she and Isola wasted the long, delicious hours together.

"Can't guess," replied Isola. "My own impression is, from my knowledge of his habits, that he has gone off somewhere beyond the regular route of ordinary mortals—Australia perhaps, or China, or Patagonia."

"I wish he'd turn up again. We're becoming dreadfully dull here; and the two old gentlemen—I almost said fogies—are resolved to stay here till he comes; and something amusing might arise in connection with those men who are in search of him. I hope he isn't hiding from them."

"Hiding from them! I'm ashamed of you, Claudia. You ought to know your own brother by this time. I don't believe he is afraid of any creature upon earth."

"Enthusiastic darling!" laughed the Panther. "*I* don't think him a coward, I assure you, having better reasons, perhaps, than your own for knowing that Raphael would face the devil himself. But he may be in hiding for reasons besides cowardice. He may have run away with somebody, you know. And if he is hiding I fear we shan't come across him till he chooses to show himself. That's what I meant."

"I see," said Isola. "But do you know anybody he's likely to have run away with?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the Panther, "what did those four men want the other day? Surely"—and she paused.

"Surely what, Claudia?"

"I was thinking of that silly little Anne. He can't have thought *her* worth taking away. Yet what could Morfill want?"

"I daresay he came as a lawyer," said Isola.

"Perhaps he did," replied Claudia reflectively.

"I can't conceive Raphael's taking a fancy to that babyish creature. But surely there isn't anything between him and Lady Æmilia Hudson."

"It isn't much use our attempting to guess," said Isola.

"There is something uncommonly queer about it. But your brother knows pretty well how to take his own part."

"That's true enough," said Claudia with a sigh.

Both those young ladies knew that Raphael had very recently been in their immediate neighbourhood, one of them indeed having recognised him; but they also knew his erratic habits, and felt by no means sure that he was still within the limits of the continent of Europe. And they were in a charming state of eager curiosity as to what in the world could induce him to behave so strangely.

What a delightful thing female curiosity is! Ever since Eve found it impossible to deny herself a taste of a certain appetising apple it has done its work in the world. If you want a man's wife to read a letter which you address to him, mark it "*private*" in portentous characters. And feminine folk far less interested in you than your wife are kind enough to scrutinise the envelopes of your letters and to conjecture their contents. If we should ever get through petticoat government—a female bureaucracy—I trust there won't be a Postmistress-General. If there is, by Jove, I'll write no letters.

It must, I think, be admitted that the Panther and Isola had better reasons than many ladies for being inquisitive. Knowing what they did, each in her own way, of Raphael's peculiar characteristics, they might very well suppose that his present conduct had some very singular reasons. So they speculated and wondered, and nothing whatever came of it.

. . . . . .

"Deuced queer," said Devil Branscombe to his brother, "what can have become of that boy? Nobody's heard of him here. Don't see why he should play *me* a trick. I'm tired of waiting for him."

"You must wait a little longer," replied the Wolf, puffing away in grand style at his negrohead, "if you want to see him—and I don't think you could find a pleasanter place to wait in; nice lazy place, where mere existence is a luxury."

"You're getting poetical in your old age, Duke," said his elder brother. "I don't dislike Naples, you know; but I hate waiting about for other people."

"He didn't ask you to wait," remarked the Wolf.

"But I *am* waiting, you see. He didn't ask me to come here, but he led me to expect he would be here. I suppose the truth is he has forgotten all about it, and doesn't imagine we are over here."

"I don't know about that," returned the Wolf, who had a tolerable notion of the Seraph's peculiarities; "Raphael has a good memory."

"Well, it's a most infernal nuisance," said Ralph Branscombe. "I don't particularly care to see him, but after waiting so long for him it seems absurd to give him up and go away."

"I don't see that," said Marmaduke; "if you're tired of the place, let's move. We haven't been over to Castellamare or Sor-

rento all this time. Suppose we cross to-morrow or next day. By the Lord Harry, that's a fine girl!"

Devil Branscombe raised his vast bulk lazily, and looked after the person who had aroused Wolf Branscombe's admiration.

"Very tidy," he said; "English evidently. Can't she walk!"

Ay, Mr. Ralph Branscombe, English, evidently. That fine stepper in yachting costume, something of the build of Mr. Leighton's "Helen of Troy," is your son Raphael, little as you guess it.

. . . . . .

"I'm very weary of this, Maule," said the young Earl of Shottesbrooke. "Waiting, under our circumstances, is terrible work; waiting here amid all the wicked witchery and indolent beauty of Naples is sheer torture to me."

"It is very trying," said Maule. "I can only preach patience. Hudson and Morfill are not so restless."

"It is worse for me than for them. A sister is worse than a wife. You can divorce an adulterous wife; you cannot destroy the ties of blood. My case is worse than theirs, Frank."

They were joined at this moment by the two other men, who had been at some little distance. It was a weary business, lounging and loitering through the long summer days, with a faint, vague hope of vengeance some time in the future. They were all tired of it in their several ways. The Bayard blood of the young Earl was chiefly fretted. Hudson was a man of phlegmatic temperament, but even he was restless. Morfill, perhaps, was quietest; he had sacrificed the ambition of his life for revenge, and could afford to wait. As to Frank Maule, though he confessed it to none of the others, he heartily wished he had never taken the command of the expedition. What had he to do with it that he should waste the whole delicious summer in this fashion? But he felt bound in honour not only not to draw back, but also to encourage his comrades to the utmost.

"Fine girl, that!" said Hudson abruptly, levelling a large double-barrelled glass at a bright blue figure in the middle distance. "Look, Maule."

Frank Maule took the glass and looked through it for some time.

"By Jove," he said, "I've seen that young lady somewhere. She's remarkably handsome. Do you recognise her, Shottesbrooke?"

He passed the glass to the Earl, who looked through it attentively for a moment, and then shut it up with a crash that threatened the lenses.

"My God! it's impossible," he exclaimed under his breath.

"You know her?" said Maule interrogatively.

The Earl did not reply for a minute. He was not famous for presence of mind. At last he said—

"I think I do. Will you keep those two fellows quiet if I follow her? It may be important for our search."

"I will manage it," said Frank Maule unsuspiciously. He knew Lord Shottesbrooke was incapable of intrigue, and naturally supposed he had recognised some feminine acquaintance of Raphael's. So he kept Morfill and Hudson from following the Earl by the use of some well-contrived excuse.

Shottesbrooke had a very quick eye for form. He was an artist, and, for an amateur, a good one; and he had been particularly successful in catching the likeness of a few men and women, whom he had portrayed in chalks. We all wear masks. A great portrait painter must have the power of seeing through those masks, and painting the true faces which exist below. When Apollo took to photography he struck the final blow at Paganism, by showing his utter incapacity to do anything of the kind. Well, the power which Vandyck and some other men have shown in this way, Lord Shottesbrooke to some extent possessed, and as people are always fond of doing what they are conscious they do well, he had an especial fancy for studying the faces of men and women. Whenever a face seemed to indicate a notable character, he noted it; and being young, such faces adhered to his memory. He was wont to try to fathom the meaning of eyes whose colour, of lips whose curve, were to most men inscrutable; and a face more enigmatic than usual was to him dearer than to the numismatist an undecipherable coin, than to the naturalist an unclassified animal. Now he had only once or twice, and then casually, encountered Raphael Branscombe; but the glimpses he had caught of him had shown him that the Seraph's was a face of meanings many and deep, and he therefore remembered that face with such accuracy that he could have sketched it unmistakably on his thumb nail with a pencil.

And it chanced that as he looked through the binocular which Maule passed to him, the superb azure figure in the middle distance turned round, probably to look at the pale cone of Vesuvius, and the Earl caught a face so easy to recognise, that he could not repress the exclamation which came to his lips.

He was not, as I have said, a man with much presence of mind, which quality indeed is usually the result of experience. When everything that possibly can happen to a man has happened to him, he is not likely to be frightened by old events in fresh forms. On the other hand, when you are young and living amid strong excitement, your brain works with a rapidity which, on reflection, often appears miraculous. It took Shottesbrooke scarcely a moment to decide that this dashing lady must be Raphael Branscombe in disguise, that the right thing for him to do was to sever himself from his companions, and pursue this trail alone.

And he had been longing to do this. To the noble young Earl there seemed something very base in four men following the track of one. He loathed his companions. Frank Maule was the best of them; but he despised Frank for undertaking a

quest which in no way concerned him, just to gratify his amateur detective tastes. And he abhorred Morfill, with whom it was impossible to pass any time without discovering that he was selfish and a snob. And he detested Hudson, in whom the cad attained development more enormous every day.

He wanted to be alone with his revenge. He had got so far as to despise himself for even a temporary partnership in the search for his sister's betrayer. And now God had given him his opportunity. The house of Hastings was to be avenged by the good sword of its chief. It was thus the young Earl felt, when he saw the light blue yachting suit in the distance—worn, he knew, by Raphael Branscombe.

He could only venture to watch that patch of brilliant colour, following with almost a loiterer's step. Haste would arouse his comrades, from whom he was as eager to escape as he was to overtake his quarry; even if he was wrong—which he felt to be impossible—he would never again rejoin them. He would pursue the quest alone. This resolve burned within him as he cautiously continued his pursuit.

What had brought the Seraph in his favourite disguise to Naples? Well, just to reconnoitre. He had heard from Louis that there were hawks abroad. Those four gentlemen could not remain so persistently at Naples without causing gossip. Therefore the Seraph, before he made his final arrangements as to Anne Morfill, determined to see for himself whether he was pursued, and who were his pursuers. He had not the least difficulty in satisfying his curiosity. When he recognised Morfill, and Hudson, and Lord Shottesbrooke, he knew what had happened almost as well as if he had been reading this story. And when he passed his father and uncle he broke into a soliloquy of this sort—

"So, they're after me. Two sets—friends and enemies. Suppose I were to reveal myself first to my allies. Suppose I were to say to the old Wolf, *Look here, my venerable uncle! Here be four fools after me for running away with a pretty girl. Let us drown them in the Bay of Naples!* I can imagine his grinning pleasantly at me—showing those fine white tusks of his, and replying, *Leave them to me, Raphael.* Now, gentlemen, what do you say?" continued the Seraph, apostrophising the group, whom he had left far behind him. "Shall I leave you to him? Egad, 'twould save me a considerable amount of trouble. But no, 'twould be cowardly. More than that, I should lose a good deal of fun. Why shouldn't I shoot Hudson and Morfill, and give poor young Shottesbrooke a slight flesh wound as a lesson to him, and then horsewhip Maule for his infernal impertinence in interfering in my affairs? Faith, that's what I'll do. I'll get back to Sorrento at once, and make some arrangement about Morfill's wife, and then come back here and meet them face to face."

Having thus resolved, he got on board a light skiff that awaited him, and was soon half way across the bay. The heat of

the afternoon had raised a slight mist from the divine waters, so that from the shore he and young Columbus, his sole companion, were very easily discernible.

But the Earl of Shottesbrooke had been in time to trace the bright blue figure he pursued to its disappearance at the steps. Arrived at the head of the water stair, he saw the boat with its lateen sail already half lost amid the mist of the waves. But he could still follow the solent blue; so he descended the steps, looking about for boat and boatman.

The former he saw at once. A small boat, fit either for sail or oar, was fastened by a rope to an iron ring. He cast her off and stepped the mast, and was soon in full pursuit of his enemy, heartily rejoicing that he was alone in his pursuit. It soon became obvious that Raphael was bound for Sorrento; this ascertained, the Earl, whose temperament was calm, allowed his impetuosity to die away. He could find his foe in Sorrento.

Meanwhile Raphael Branscombe, whose boat was the fleeter, soon reached his destination. He had a marvellous power of fascination, the Seraph. He had made young Columbus his most absolute slave. That ingenuous young Genoese kept complete secrecy as to his employer's frequent changes of apparel. By the time the boat had reached Sorrento, Raphael had resumed his customary costume.

But he needed a little time to decide how to deal with Anne Page—and he had not the slightest idea that he was followed—and so he lit a cigar and strolled among the orange groves, delaying his visit to the Hôtel Rispoli. He always dined late, so his hapless, loving little companion would not yet expect him. He wanted to pull himself together. He had to determine where to send Anne, under Louis's charge, out of the way of mischief before walking into the hornet's nest at Naples and saying—

"Gentlemen, you are looking for some one apparently. Is it Raphael Branscombe you want?"

So he loitered and lingered in the fragrant alleys of golden fruitage, smoking cigars even more fragrant than the apples of Atalanta, and thinking nothing—or very little—of the foolish child anxiously awaiting him at Rispoli's, and utterly unaware of the stern young English earl so close upon his track.

CHAPTER XXXV.

EDWARD, EARL OF SHOTTESBROOKE.

"MAN proposes, God disposes." I don't know why the French monopolise this adage, or another intimately connected with it and perpetually reverified—"nothing is certain save the unforeseen." In the most trivial business of life how endlessly is

the truth of this proverbial philosophy forced on us? King Solomon (whom I will forgive for your *Proverbs*, if indeed you wrote the *Canticles*), if you had hit upon either of the above adages you would indeed have deserved your renown. But, pshaw, how could you? It required genius, which you possessed not. I think I may safely assert that Solomon's wealth was the only remarkable thing about him. He had none of his father's genius. His brother Absalom was worth a dozen of him.

Indeed, Saul and Absalom appear to me quite the two noblest figures in the days of regal Jerusalem. David was a great poet, no doubt, but he was thoroughly treacherous. Solomon was the Gladstone of those days. You can see the fine, heroic aspect of the first monarch Saul, even through the unfair history of the times produced by the clerical party who supported the usurper. Priests invariably falsify history.

If one could obtain sufficient knowledge of the ways of the men in Jerusalem a thousand years before Christ, what a marvellous historical romance could be written of the time when Solomon and Absalom were young men about town!

But I must return to Sorrento and the current century. Raphael Branscombe was not destined to carry out his designs precisely as he formed them. He had taken two or three turns, and just reached the end of his cigar, when the young Earl of Shottesbrooke confronted him, sudden and stern. A mere boy, the Earl, but a fine, gallant English boy; of the middle height, yet taller than Raphael; with light Saxon complexion, and glistening hair, and soft vernal moustache. At the first glance you would probably incline to pity him for being forced on such stern, sad business—to deem him too young for rough contact with a man devoid of fear and of conscience; but a second examination would show that the purity and valour which shone in that fair young face made him no childish enemy. Blood of Hastings had never ran in craven veins yet. The high-hearted young noble would have mounted a breach or led a charge of cavalry as gaily as he defended his wicket at Eton. At this moment the vile shame—the double shame—which had fallen upon him would have caused him to forget all fear, if fear had been in his blood. He stood right in Raphael Branscombe's way. He said—

"Mr. Branscombe, I have an account to settle with you."

Raphael had not expected this. But his steel nerves were unshaken. He threw away the end of his cigar and took another from his case, and said—"Well, my lord?"

The Earl was too stern to be irritated by any minor insolence of manner. He said haughtily—

"You need not give me the pain to attempt an unnecessary explanation. You cannot stoop so low as to pretend ignorance of the cause of quarrel. You are not a coward, I think."

"Why, no," said Raphael with a light laugh, which would have irritated a man less under the sway of an avenging resolve

The Seraph thought at that moment of Sir Arthur Willesden, to whom he had addressed words so similar. "I believe not, my lord. But, really, I have no friend here in Sorrento."

"You have friends in Naples," said the Earl. "So have I."

"Ah! You are in a hurry, I see. To-morrow morning, of course; the sooner such an affair is over the better. Who is your friend?"

Lord Shottesbrooke hesitated for a moment, and then said, "Mr. Maule."

"Very well. If he will be at the Caffè d'Europa at midnight I will send some one to meet him. Good evening, my lord."

Raphael turned away and lighted his cigar. The Earl went slowly and sadly to the coast. He would have an unfavourable wind for his return, and it was already getting towards sunset; but he thought little of the twelve miles of sea which lay between him and Naples. He thought only of the morrow and of standing in deadly duel with his sister's betrayer.

As to the Seraph, he was greatly annoyed. His plans were upset. He must despatch Louis to Naples at once, and was consequently compelled to defer his arrangements for Mrs. Morfill. Well, he should have another quiet night at any rate. So he entered the garden of the Hôtel Rispoli. And, as he passed along a pleasant lawn overshadowed by orange trees, Stephen's lost love, still beautiful through her guilt, came flying into his arms. Clothed in maiden-white, with her long brown hair in girlish fashion, with no touch of trouble in her lovely eyes, no casual spectator could have guessed her what she was. She looked a most innocent and loving young bride. Such, in truth, she would have been had she seen Raphael Branscombe before Humphrey Morfill. She came with a coo of love to Raphael's breast, as if it were her home. Poor little fool! What if she could have known the thoughts and plans of that inscrutable schemer?

"Go and dress for dinner, child," said Raphael, after petting her as if she had been a favourite dog. "I am awfully hungry. Send Louis to me."

He wrote a brief note and gave it to that excellent valet, directing him to find old Marmaduke Branscombe and give it him as quietly as possible.

"It is rather late to cross twice, Louis," said the Seraph; "but you need not hurry back. Perhaps he will return with you. If so, and I am gone to bed, don't let him disturb me."

Louis promised obedience, and started at once. What did the Seraph do? He dressed for dinner; and then descended to that meal, which Rispoli had tastefully prepared for him in a pleasant room overlooking a precipitous cliff, with a superb view of the sapphire bay. Gaily they dined together, for Anne was always gay where Raphael was, and eventful living brought him gaiety. It was a delicious evening and a delicious dinner; and when it was over, and Raphael, with the green wine-flask at his elbow,

sat by the open window and smoked, while Anne crouched on a low seat at his knee, and his white hand was half hidden in her abundant brown tresses, a stranger would have said it was a delicious picture.

. . . . . .

Young Lord Shottesbrooke, with all his athletic training, was thoroughly fagged when he reached Naples. In his excitement he had neither eaten nor drank, and his return voyage had been a long one. He went at once to his room, and sent his valet for a bottle of champagne, which he drank at a draught. His three companions had dined without him, and were wondering what had become of him.

Maule was particularly puzzled. He understood, somewhat better than either of the others, the Earl's nobility and refinement of character, and felt assured that his sudden chase of a bright blue yachting costume had some grave meaning. Either Hudson or Morfill might have been tempted into an intrigue, but not Shottesbrooke. But the mystery was soon explained to him. The Earl's servant brought him a pencilled note, which he contrived to give him when neither Hudson nor Morfill looked that way. So Maule adroitly persuaded those two gentlemen to sit down to *écarté*, and joined the Earl.

"I have seen him, Maule," he said, when the door was closed. "*I* shall punish him, thank God. Don't say a word to those men."

Maule expressed the extreme surprise which he felt.

"Yes, he's at Sorrento. I've crossed twice, and am regularly fagged. I must go to bed, to be ready for to-morrow. You'll be secret, won't you?" he said imploringly.

"On my honour I will. But what arrangement have you made?"

"You must be my second. Go to the *café* at midnight, and a man from him will meet you. I don't know who. Fix the time as early as you can, and let me sleep till the last moment. If I *can* sleep, that is."

"I will do all you wish," said Maule. And therewith he left the Earl of Shottesbrooke to get such rest as he might on the eve of avenging the honour of his family.

. . . . . .

Meanwhile Louis, faithful and indefatigable, had found Marmaduke Branscombe, and handed him this letter:

"HÔTEL RISPOLI, SORRENTO.

"MY DEAR UNCLE,—I have got to fight a duel to-morrow with Earl Shottesbrooke, and want you to be my second. One can't ask one's father, you know. A man called Maule will meet you at the Caffè d'Europa at midnight to make arrangements. He must bring his man over here; I'm not coming across to fight. Fix it as early as you can.—RAPHAEL BRANSCOMBE."

The old Wolf read this characteristic note with eyes wide open, and then silently handed it to his brother.

"The young scoundrel!" exclaimed Ralph. "He's been close by all this time. What the deuce can he have to fight about? Shottesbrooke's quite a boy, I think—too young to be married."

"Perhaps he's got sisters," said Marmaduke.

"Well, it doesn't much matter. You'll act for him, of course, and I'll go across and see the fun from a distance. Raphael has been out once or twice before now."

The two old gentlemen dismissed Louis to refresh himself, and walked towards their Palazzo from the hotel at which, after considerable search, the valet had found them.

"We mustn't tell the girls," said Marmaduke.

"I don't think either of them would care a stiver," replied Devil Branscombe. "Claudia's no coward, I know, and I don't suppose Isola is, being a daughter of yours. However, it doesn't matter; we'll sup, and then go to the Caffè. How shall you know this Mr. Maule?"

"Easily find him. There aren't many English here just now."

Maule had been unable, with all his tact, to separate himself from his companions. To his annoyance they would go down to the Caffè with him. Here, however, he was in luck. They found a couple of other men playing *écarté*, and as they had been thus occupied themselves all the evening, what more natural than that they should be disposed to bet? Thus Maule was enabled to stroll in search of Raphael's friend. He was almost immediately accosted by the Wolf.

"Let us walk outside and settle this matter," said Maule. "My principal has friends here whom he does not wish to know what he intends." They acted accordingly.

"I know nothing of the quarrel, Mr. Maule," said Marmaduke. "I cannot guess therefore whether it can be ended peacefully."

"Impossible, sir. We are the challenging party. No apology can be accepted."

"None is offered," said the old gentleman grimly. "A lady in the case, eh?"—Maule explained.

"Well," said Marmaduke, "we give you choice of weapons, and will fight as soon as you like; but it must be at Sorrento."—"Why?"

"It is too late to arrange otherwise. Besides, it is much safer for all parties concerned."

"Very well," replied Maule, "perhaps you are right. What hour shall we fix for to-morrow?"

"Say from eight to nine," replied the Wolf. "Your man and mine will both want sleep, and it is impossible to calculate to half-an-hour the time to be allowed for crossing. It is a great mistake to get up very early if you are going to fight. Perhaps we had better have a margin up to ten."

"You are very obliging," said Maule.

"Well, you see my principal is at Sorrento. If you know him

at all, you are aware that five minutes' notice will suffice for him. I shall cross at once, and be ready for you. Your duty is to bring your man on the ground in good order, and I shouldn't hurry him if I were you. There's ample space at Sorrento to do the business easily without interruption."

Maule and Marmaduke Branscombe parted to take such measures as were necessary. Maule determined that the young Earl should assuredly have the rest which the fatigue and excitement of the day had made absolutely requisite. So he snatched an hour or two of sleep himself, and he induced Lord Shottesbrooke, not without difficulty, to make a sensible breakfast in the morning before they crossed. How cruel a deed of destiny it seems, that a man whose position in the world is full of promise, and who possesses all the moral and intellectual qualifications necessary for the fulfilment of that promise, should be forced by no fault of his own to sacrifice everything! Œdipus dashed from the height of a well-won prosperity to adversity almost intolerable, is no caricature of what may happen to men. A few weeks ago, Edward, Earl of Shottesbrooke, was a man whom the multitude might envy. He was young, handsome, gallant, honourable; moderately rich for an Earl, moderately intellectual for an Earl, and endowed with a modest ambition to pursue that career of politics in which a young Earl, if he cannot succeed, must be an ass. Edward, Earl of Shottesbrooke, was a happy man, and had excellent reasons for being happy. *Now*, he was the most miserable of men—a man whose misery was complicated with a fierce indignant sense of wrong. For what had *he* done? Nothing. Why had the pitiless powers smitten him with shame which no blood could wash away? Even if he killed Raphael Branscombe, he could never again move with erect form and unwrinkled forehead among the gentlemen of England, his peers. Why? Because a girl of his blood had for the first time for the many centuries during which the history of the house of Hastings belonged to the history of England disgraced that house. Worse. Because the woman who had given him birth had connived at that disgrace—had not said to her sinning daughter, "Kill yourself—you have no right to live." But what the Earl hoped against hope was that Raphael Branscombe might kill *him*. He could not, that was the worst of it. Branscombe, as a gentleman and a man of honour, could not shoot at the man whose sister's fame he had stained. Lord Shottesbrooke knew perfectly that this was a rule which his antagonist would not dream of breaking through. If it could have been! If he might have fallen by Branscombe's unerring bullet, ending for ever the long line of the Shottesbrooke Earls! No, there was no hope of it.

Shottesbrooke was a Christian—not, of course, so thorough a Christian as to forget that he was an Englishman and an Earl. But his Christianity was sufficient to make him shrink from suicide. Had he been a Roman he would not for a moment have blenched from "what Cato did and Addison approved." It would

have appeared to him the shortest sternest way of dealing with an unjust fate. He fought for a long time against the idea. But at last it was too strong for such faith as he possessed. He began to believe that his case was baseless—that the Ruler of the world was not good but evil—that fate was unjust to him—that he had a right to take his life into his own hands. He would do that thing. He would kill Raphael Branscombe if he could; at any rate, however that might be, he most assuredly would kill himself. It was with this inflexible resolve, formed while in the hazy morning he crossed Italy's most beautiful bay, that he landed on the shore of Sorrento. He had not exchanged a word with Maule the whole way. Nor was poor Frank disposed to be loquacious; now that the supreme moment approached, he wished himself well out of it. The morning was ripening into broad day when they landed. The old Wolf and Raphael's valet had arrived before them, but had not gone on to Rispoli's.

"Don't disturb him till the other fellow comes," said Marmaduke. "Sleep steadies the hand."

So he was sitting on a great block of stone and smoking the negrohead, while Ralph Branscombe walked up and down not far off, when the Earl and his second landed. The Wolf greeted Maule with the ceremonious courtesy of a gentleman of good blood accustomed to the duello.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

VENDETTA.

A CHAMBER in the Hôtel Rispoli, with a wide window overlooking a sea of verdure, which, dotted with golden fruitage, stretched far below to the white verge of the sapphire sea itself. Two heads upon one white pillow, calm and beautiful heads, such as seemed rather to belong to antique Greece than to any modern region or race. The woman, scarce a woman yet, with amplitude of glossy brown hair, with azure veined eyelids peacefully closed over eyes which any prying Iachimo would know to be divine; with a mouth so small and ripe that Iachimo aforesaid could hardly refrain from kissing. Calmly she slept, her unseen bosom lightly moving the light draperies. The other head more beautiful than hers—and more calm. A head that Iachimo, if previously ignorant on the topic, might well suppose a woman's also; but mingled with its unrivalled grace and beauty, there was a strength, there was a sternness, which no woman—no, nor Artemis, nor even inviolate Athene—ever possessed. An epicene countenance, an epicene character, that of Raphael Branscombe. And how calm he lies, with no dream of the imminent duel causing his fingers to clench or his lips to twitch! Will he ever wake again?

The spongy air is absorbing the broad light of day. There comes a low knock at the chamber door. Neither sleeper moves. It grows loud and impatient. Then, after a while, Anne Morfill stirs in her sleep, and the white lids rise from the delicious brown eyes, and she looks around, wondering. She looks upon Raphael —who does not move. Strange that he should sleep so tranquilly with such work to do.

Suddenly something strikes her eye, and she starts back appalled. She springs from the bed in affright. She tears at her night-dress as if to tear it from her person. She shrieks with a shriek so full of terror that no human ear could mistake its meaning.

Louis had been the first to knock at the door of his master's chamber. The delay had brought up first Marmaduke and then his elder brother. The shriek, that most affrighting utterance of woman's utmost distress, had brought others also.

"What is the matter?" said Marmaduke, trying to open the bedroom door.

It was locked.

"This won't do," exclaimed Devil Branscombe.

And with one lurch of his strong shoulders he burst it from its fastenings.

Right opposite him stood—what once was sweet Anne Page. A woman no longer, for the soul had left her strange wild eyes, which were ghastly with sudden madness. Her snowy night-dress was stained with blood, blood still wet, still warm. She was striving to tear it away with her weak white hands, hideously reddened as she strove. She took no notice of the men who entered the room; with that one shriek her mind had gone for ever, and she uttered troubled moans that made those who heard her weep.

But Ralph and Marmaduke Branscombe strode rapidly forward to the bed. There lay Raphael, unmoved by all this clamour. No wonder. Right through his breast was driven a long keen dagger with ivory hilt, and upon the silver plate of the hilt was cut roughly but legibly—

VENDETTA: ANGELO MONTALTI.

And no one there knew what this ominous inscription meant. It was an enigma to all. There was nothing certain save that Raphael Branscombe was dead, stone dead; that Anne Morfill was mad; that another hand had taken the revenge for which the young Earl of Shottesbrooke had so fiercely thirsted.

It was a terrible blow to Ralph Branscombe. There is often a vast depth of family affection in the hearts of men who are as hard as iron upon most matters. Devil Branscombe cared for few things and few people; but he loved his son with a fierce tigerish admiring love, as his natural successor; and as a man of his own mould, more resolute and daring than even himself.

I suppose if the Arch Fiend had fruit of his loins he would love it. Ralph Branscombe muttered a deep and earnest oath of vengeance, gave one last look at his son, and then with the dagger in his hand, which he had taken from Raphael's breast, strode silently downstairs, Marmaduke silently following him.

It was a strange sight to see those two old men on the steps of the Hôtel Rispoli, both unconscious of the divine sweep of land and sea over which they seemed to gaze, both hungry to clutch the throat of the man who had slain the hope of their house.

Lord Shottesbrooke was stunned by the unforeseen event. What could he do now? He was defrauded of even his revenge. This man, it seemed, should have had many lives, and died as many deaths as he had committed crimes. The Earl had now to deal with himself only. Every one else at Sorrento was excited by the mystery of Raphael's murder; but Lord Shottesbrooke went away from them all, and strode up and down the shore of the tranquil sea, as Homer's hero had done centuries before, and could come to no fixed resolve as to what it was meet for him to do. The pure shield of the Shottesbrooke Earls was defiled by the most cruel of stains. Men might not know it—yet there are no such things as secrets in the world, no hidden things which time does not reveal. Even if unrevealed to others, *he* should know it. What should he do? What should he do?

He longed to kill himself. It was no cowardice that deterred him—it was that sense of duty which is the special characteristic of the English gentleman. He could not feel certain that he had a right to kill himself. It was so easy a solution of the terrible difficulty. Yet there came for ever into his mind the passionate questioning of the hero of the world's most ancient tragedy—

"Wherefore is light given unto him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter in soul?"

Meanwhile, Stephen Langton in Corsica was oppressed by a strange presentiment—a presentiment which caused Fiordilisa's girlish gaiety to give him intense pain. She had no apprehensions; but the Seraph's disappearance, and Palliser's report from Naples, and Montalti's departure, made Stephen anticipate a tragedy. His old visionary faculty returned to him. As, in cigar-esque indolence, he loitered along Isola Rossa's enchanted coast, there was ever before him a dream of Raphael drenched in blood, of sweet Anne Page weeping by his corpse. So strong became his conviction that there was some dread event about to occur that he at last persuaded Palliser to take another run across to Naples, and himself accompanied him. But he told Fiordilisa that they were only going to cruise round Cape Corso.

The beautiful *Seagull* had a fair wind all the way to Naples. She ran into the bay on the morning fixed for the duel. Langton and Palliser found Hudson and Morfill perplexed by the absence of their companions, which had been quietly arranged by Frank Maule. But ill news travels fast: rumour of some terrible

event at Sorrento soon reached the city; and it was not much after noon when Stephen leaped ashore from the *Seagull's* boat, and found himself in the presence of Ralph and Marmaduke Branscombe.

Angelo Montalti's dagger told *him* the whole story.

And now he reproached himself for having left Fiordilisa. By this time, without doubt, the old Corsican had returned to Isola Rossa, and proclaimed to all men his vendetta accomplished. They are very stern, those Corsicans. A young herdsman, who took a bribe to betray two French deserters, was tried and shot by his kinsmen for the breach of hospitality, his aged father commanding him to die bravely. And Stephen doubted not that Angelo would narrate to the Lily of Isola Rossa where he had found Raphael, and what revenge he had taken. Could she endure this? Had she, like many of her romantic race, the spirit which gave strength to Antigone, to Iphigenia?

Stephen Langton ascended to the chamber of murder. There lay the mortal tenement of the wildest spirit he had ever known. One thrust of steel, and Raphael—with all his bizarre fancies, his deeds done because they were daring, his capricious quarrels and capricious loves—was a nonentity, so far as men were concerned. He had solved the great problem. It is hard to describe what a blank was left in Stephen's life-drama by the vanishing of its chief *dramatis personæ.* Stephen was essentially a poet; Raphael essentially an actor. The difference between them was the difference between Richardson and Lovelace.

And now Stephen wanted to know what had become of the vivid force which passed from the chill remains of Raphael. Force cannot perish.

"Oh," exclaims Büchner the Teuton, "force is matter, matter is force."

Is it? Are they? I wish some of us knew. Is God conscious or unconscious, Büchner with bathos of brain? That is the crucial question.

Where was Raphael? Visionary Stephen Langton could not rest in his ignorance. From the day when he, a boy-victim, had been driven by his grandfather, the tanner, to see the Branscombes at breakfast, he had been possessed by members of that strange family. Ay, before that time. Sweet Anne Page was his love in the days long past when he learned dissyllabic spelling at a mixed school of boys and girls, and did not much fear the schoolmistress's rod because Aunt Harriet's heavier hand had given him stoicism. Then Claudia had almost conquered him; then the old Wolf had sprung suddenly into the arena of his life; then the Seraph had been his guide, philosopher, friend, hero, terror, demon. *Ay de mi!* Sweet Anne Page was a maniac—and the Panther had passed out of his life—and the Seraph was—*dead.*

Dead! I wonder men grieve when those die whom they love. They should rather feel a fierce indignation. What, on any of

the multiplex theories which are presented for our belief, have we done that we should be brought into this world (we know not whence) without being consulted as to time or place, or the position to be occupied, or the people to be our relations—and subjected to all manner of circumstances, still without choice—and then be hurried out of the world, without any courtesy or previous consultation or intimation, nobody knowing whither? I say it is flat tyranny. Orthodoxy (the orthodoxy of a minority) tells us of eternal happiness and eternal punishment. Others prate, or have prated, of elysian fields, of metempsychosis, of absorption, of annihilation. What said Achilleus to Odysseus?—

> "'Scoff not at death,' he answered, 'noble chief!
> Rather would I in the sun's warmth divine
> Serve a poor churl who drags his days in grief,
> Than the whole lordship of the dead were mine.'"

If the yarn which Odysseus spun to Alcinous had any truth in it, most of us will agree with the Greek hero. A shadow among shadows would find it slow.

Metempsychosis would be amusing if it were not dissociated from consciousness and memory. That is a fatal blot in the arrangement. After being a great man for one life, it would be rather nice to be a small man's dog. When they were fighting before Troy, Homer was a camel in Bactria. With human consciousness, a man might be very happy (for a time) as a falcon, a carrier pigeon, a Derby crack, a greyhound, even a lobster. There would be less satisfaction in being Lesbia's sparrow or Lady Vivian Ashleigh's favourite riding-horse.

As to absorption—the disappearance of the individual in the infinite spirit—it is satisfactory enough. One's spirit will still be doing its work in the world. Probably this is the most philosophic of all the theories—annihilation is demonstrably impossible—and therefore may be the right thing after all.

So far as I can remember, some of these notions passed rapidly through the brain of Stephen Langton, as he stood by the dead body of his friend. So absorbed was he in his thoughts that he did not notice, lying across the foot of the bed, a white heap—once sweet Anne Page.

Suddenly, as he leaned over Raphael's pillow, she sprang from the crushed collapsed position into which she had fallen, and glared at him with eyes full of lustre, yet void of meaning—and he saw that she was mad. No one had ventured to remove her. The two old men had not thought of her. The people of the hotel kept away from the room of death.

It immediately occurred to Stephen that Claudia should be here. She was needed both for her father and her cousin. He turned slowly away from the blood-stained bed—from Raphael's corpse, and from the wreck of the girl whom he had loved—and upon the threshold met Claudia and Isola, whom Louis had fetched from Naples, Maule suggesting.

"Thank God, you are come!" he exclaimed earnestly.

It was indeed fortunate; women are not tenderer than men, not perhaps so tender; but they have a capacity for understanding illness of any sort which men never possess. Women have less individuality than men; are more fluent; can more easily adapt themselves to an atmosphere of imperfect health. Perhaps neither the Panther nor her cousin was the most suitable and desirable creature for the business in hand, but either of them was infinitely preferable to any male human being, unless professionally medical.

Many matters had Stephen Langton to discuss with himself. He had come into the midst of this tragedy, a *Deus ex machina*. What should he do in reference to Devil Branscombe? The dead man's father ought, perhaps, to be told why his son had met his death by an avenger's stiletto. Then there was the old Wolf to be considered. If *he* knew where Raphael's assassin might be found, he would, Stephen felt assured, follow him to the death without scruple. The Wolf was not a man for honourable deeds. Given Angelo Montalti's whereabouts, the Wolf's myrmidons would be set upon him at once. Questionless, when inquiry came to be made, the Branscombes would find some way of tracing Montalti; but what was Stephen's duty in this case?

Again, what could he say to the ladies of the family? The Panther would be satisfied with no evasions. Even were he given to lying, he could not lie, with her black lustrous eyes fixed upon his. But Stephen loved the truth and fresh flowers and spring water *almost* as well as Mr. Charles Reade. She would easily perceive that he possessed the clue to this terrible affair. How could he conceal it?

Again, there was Isola. A thrill had passed through Stephen Langton as he looked upon Isola Branscombe. Somehow or other, from the first day that he had met the old Wolf's daughter —creature of fantasy and caprice—she had exercised over him a fascination inexplicable. And his somewhat superstitious temperament induced him to believe that he was destined to link his destiny with the destiny of the strange girl, whose stranger father he had most strangely encountered at the corner of Maidenhead Thicket. Was she indeed his destiny? Had he suddenly left England to escape the influence of the Branscombes, only to be more completely involved by that influence. Was he like some strong swimmer in a whirlpool, who strikes into what he fancies to be calm water, and finds himself in the very centre of the eddy—sucked downwards into the awful throat of Scylla?

Certes, Isola had a charm about her which he had noted in no other woman. She was thoroughly original. She was attractive without striving to be attractive. Claudia had fascinated him, had repelled him, had striven to be his mistress, had striven to be his slave; he had worshipped, adored, loved, hated, despised her; when he thought of her it was in the words of the Roman

Thackeray—"*Militavi non sine gloriâ.*" But he was separated utterly from Claudia now. The two had done their best to become one, and had completely failed. They had always made their endeavours in the wrong way, or at the wrong moment.

But Isola! It is so delicious to think that a woman loves you. He fancied this of Isola. He fancied that he could love her. He longed to love—or to fancy he loved—somebody. So he determined to test himself and Isola, by making her his confidant in this present affair—not without a sincere conviction that it would be extremely difficult to get a *confidante* so trustworthy, or an adviser so sagacious.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ISOLA AND STEPHEN.

CLAUDIA was doing her utmost for the poor little girl who had been her rival and her victim. Little time to think had the Panther, but remorse and grief filled every interstice of thought. This child—this beautiful soulless creature for whom she had now to make provision—had fallen a sacrifice to herself and Raphael. That insatiable Branscombe spirit! If she had only left Anne Page alone to be the happy wife of Stephen Langton, how much better would it have been. Now, Anne was a maniac; now, Raphael Branscombe, the hope of his wild old house, the noblest and most daring gentleman that ever ruined women and killed men, was lying murdered in his bed. As Claudia thought of these things, looking on her slain brother's placid face, beautiful in death, she might have reminded a bystander of Luttrel's fine verse—I quote it from memory—

> "Methinks the furies with their snakes,
> Or Venus with her zone might gird her,
> Of fiend and goddess she partakes,
> And looks at once both love and murder!"

The conviction came upon her that this indeed was the end of her career; that, her brother dead, and her hapless little rival maddened by her fate, it would be henceforth her doom to live apart from all that made life joyous.

Through Louis, Stephen Langton contrived to get a message conveyed to Isola. She left her cousin and joined him in one of the rooms of the pleasant pavilion on the verge of the precipice. Her weird eyes were full of tears for Raphael.

Stephen. This is a terrible business, Isola. I want your help.

Isola. How can I help you?

Stephen. Tell me; have you imagined who had any reason to murder Raphael?

Isola. I! could *I* imagine? I only know a portion of his

life. I knew him very wild and very tender. I never knew him cruel.

Stephen. Yet he was. I, his close friend, know that. He was so cruel that this fierce vengeance which has come upon him is not too great a punishment. But, Isola, tell me—his father—and your father too—shall they know why this murderous deed was done?

Isola. Do *you* know?

Stephen. Yes.

Isola. Tell me.

Stephen. I wish to do so. He loved a beautiful young Corsican, and married her; but, having married her, he afterwards eloped with Morfill's wife—I fancy to spite Morfill.

Isola. Why was that?

Stephen. Morfill, who knew that little Anne had money, induced her to elope with him. Now, Raphael intended to have married her.

Isola. I see. Go on.

Stephen. Raphael returned to Corsica, leaving Anne Morfill here. He found his wife more lovable than when he went away. So he determined to desert Anne Morfill, and settle quietly in Corsica.

Isola. Too late!

Stephen. Too late, indeed. The Corsicans have a fierce sense of honour and a fiercer thirst for revenge. Raphael's wife's father's father killed him here, lying by Anne Morfill's side. That's all the story. What am I to do? What shall I tell his father and your father?

Isola. They must know all in time.

Stephen. I fear they must. But if I tell them now where Angelo Montalti may be found, and they pursue him, there will be other, sadder deaths.

Isola. What deaths?

Stephen. Fiordilisa and her unborn child—unborn when I left Corsica, at least.

Isola. Ah, that is terrible! And yet—and yet——

Stephen. What are you thinking of?

Isola. Why, only this—could but my father and my uncle know Raphael had left a son, they would not feel his death so terribly.

Stephen. Fiordilisa is a delicious creature. Raphael's wife ought to be perfect, and I think she is. If only she were brought to meet his father, I think we might prevent more bloodshed.

Isola. Well, shall I go off at once to Corsica—carry the news——

Stephen. She knows the news already. I hope it has not killed her. Angelo went home at once to tell her of his revenge, unless I fail to understand his nature.

Isola. How cruel!

Stephen. Corsicans are very brave. I verily believe that Fiordilisa will bear the news like some stern Grecian girl.

Isola. My education was rather neglected, Mr. Langton, so I know nothing about stern Grecian girls. But I suppose from your stilted style of talk that my poor Raphael's widow is not a nervous little fool like Anne Page, but a girl of steel like me and the Panther. You say her grandfather has probably told her all about it before this. Well, let me go over there—come with me if you like—and let us explain to her the state of affairs, and do the best we can for her and her child. Poor old Raphael! Poor dear old boy! He saved me from a horrible life, and the least I can do is to stick to his wife and child. And I will.

Stephen. You are a dear little girl, Isola, and I think you have made a wise proposal. But there are lots of difficulties. How are we to keep your father and uncle quiet meanwhile? And suppose poor little Fiordilisa's child is just born?

Isola. I must talk to Claudia. My father is a dutiful old gentleman, and will do exactly what I tell him, and I expect the Panther can manage my uncle Ralph. I'll go and speak to her at once, and then come back and tell you.

. . . . . .

Away sped Isola from the pavilion on her errand of peace. As she crossed the pleasant garden, Stephen said to himself—"By Jove, that girl's a trump!"

Not a poetic way of expressing the admiration which he felt for her courage and promptitude and loyalty, but an emphatic one.

Meanwhile Isola went to Claudia, and told her what she had learnt from Stephen, but Claudia was not so ready to support pacific measures as her cousin expected. She thought but little of Raphael's wife and child in comparison with Raphael himself. She was not disposed to forgive his murderer—the less so because Raphael had evidently intended to return to Fiordilisa. If he had fallen in fair fight with Hudson or Morfill, his sister would have uncomplainingly accepted the disaster; but to be stabbed in his bed by a man whom he had not wronged was too terrible a fate.

But Isola's earnest pleading induced Claudia to give way a little. She would not at present set her father on the track of the assassin. When the old man awoke from his momentary stupor, he would be athirst for revenge, and if he set the French police at work, Angelo Montalti would soon be hunted to the death. She would do her best to quiet him, while Isola crossed to Corsica and judged for herself.

Next there was the old Wolf—with him his daughter had little difficulty. Furious he was certainly when he heard her story, but he agreed with her that it would be well to seek Raphael's wife before resorting to decisive measures, and he also promised to curb his brother's impetuosity. So Palliser's yacht was again in requisition.

They who read the best modern poetry will well remember a noble passage in Matthew Arnold's "Tristram and Iseult"—

"The calm sea shines, loose hang the vessel's sails,
Before us are the sweet green fields of Wales,
And overhead the cloudy sky of May;
Ah! would I were in those green fields at play,
Not pent on shipboard this delicious day.
Tristram, I pray thee, of thy courtesy
Reach me my golden cup that stands by thee,
And pledge me in it first for courtesy.
Ha! dost thou start? are thy lips blanched like mine?
Child, 'tis no water this, 'tis poisoned wine!
Iseult!"

Oh, delicious picture of love upon the summer sea! What though the delight was brief—the philtre bitter—the future filled with sorrow? As the *Seagull* winged her way across the sea of Tarchon she left behind her death and grief and madness—while for aught her voyagers knew there might be death and madness mingled also with the grief that they must encounter upon Isola Rossa's coral-stained sea-marge. But between two griefs there shone an immortal joy. Between the sanguine stain of Sorrento and the lurid redness that seemed to hover above the Corsican coast there interposed a rosier hue—the purple light of love, the flush of the daughter of foam, *ore floridulo nitens.* For Isola loved Stephen, and when in the soft eventide the yacht passed the straits just as the twinkling lights began to flash from the *fanali* of Longo Sardo and picturesque Bonifazio, Isola's strange beauty seemed to Stephen more beautiful than ever, and Hesperus, rising above Caprera, looked down upon a love scene.

"Very unfeeling to think about such things when the young woman's cousin was lying murdered at Sorrento. Very improper, *I* say—though he *was* such a wicked young man they might have had some respect for his memory. It ought to have been a lesson to them."

My dear Mrs. Grundy, your view is a highly decorous one. But youth is not to be restrained. "Love will find out the way," as the old song says. And if it were not so, the multitudinous miseries of human life would soon be too much for us—bearing us down and destroying the beauty of existence as a mighty army of locusts destroys the verdure of a province. What wish does one of the most charming of living poets express to his little daughter?—

"And place not a stone to distinguish my name,
For strangers to see and discuss,
But come with your lover, as these lovers came,
And talk to him sweetly of us."

True love may well keep tryst by the grassy mounds which tell of love.

I do not know what Stephen whispered in Isola Branscombe's ear as he sat beside her on the deck of Pallisers yacht, while

that famous yachtsman was gone below for some champagne. I do know that when she lifted towards him her beautiful flushed face, her eyes were full of tears.

The mystic question has been asked by man of woman in a myriad different ways. None pleasanter, perhaps, than Mr. Coleridge's lyrical interrogation beside the ruined tower in the moonlight, when the music and the doleful tale, the rich and balmy eve, were too much for guileless Genevieve. But if, with Coleridge's power, I could depict the flying yacht passing those magical straits, cutting the phosphorescent waters whose sparkling sapphire borrowed multitudinous colours from the sunset glow, while Stephen's arm encircled Isola's dainty waist, and Isola's ever-varying eyes were filled with tenderer meaning than they had ever known before—and Isola's *bouchette coraline* tempted Stephen's loving lips—I think the scene would be quite as pleasant. Unluckily we are not all poets of the first force.

And as sweetness is unutterably sweet between two bitternesses—as April perfumes in hot Junes burned are more delicious, because then winter separates summer from summer—so this brief love-passage was all the more divine in that sad events preceded it, and none knew how sad were to be the events which should follow it.

What words passed? Who knows? Words such as Catullus whispered to Lesbia, and Shakespeare to the lady of his sonnets. Mr. Tennyson works out the love-problem very minutely in *Maud*, but he wisely shirks the supreme moment. "I must tell her, or die," exclaims his hero in his sixteenth spasm, and the eager reader turns the page to find out how he does it, and discovers—what? Why, a request to "the red man's babe, to leap, beyond the sea," because the faultily faultless creature has accepted him. But what he said—and what she replied—will never be known to mortals.

Neither will what Stephen said to Isola and Isola to Stephen. But when Seagull Palliser came on deck with champagne bottles under his arm, and a mighty silver goblet in his hand, they twain pledged one another silently.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

VOCERO.

GREGOROVIUS, most poetic of travellers, describes the extreme melancholy of Corsican song. "I had hardly," he says, "fallen asleep in my little *locanda*, when I was wakened by the sound of a guitar and singing in many parts. They played and sang for perhaps an hour in the still night before my house. It was in honour of a young lady who lived there; they sang first a *serenata*, and then *voceros*, or dirges. How strange! the

song with which they serenaded a young girl was a dirge, and the very *serenata* sounded as mournful as a *vocero*."

They are a strange people, these Corsicans. They see more of the Death Angel than most races of men. He moves among them a visible presence. He writes an autograph of blood upon their island cliffs; and familiar as they are with death in its most terrible and sudden forms, it is no wonder that the *vocero* is their favourite form of poetry.

The death of a Corsican is followed by a loud lament—the *grido*—from his relations around his bed. Then the body is laid on a table, the *tola*, against the wall—a man being dressed in antique Etrurian fashion, a maiden in white, an old woman in black, a married woman in parti-coloured vesture. They watch beside the *tola* all night, lamenting, burning a fire. In the early morning comes the *scirrata*—a vast crowd of lamenters. The women plunge into a wild pantomime of grief—a dance of death, whose only pauses come from extreme weariness. A young *voceratrice* leads the funeral song, which is almost always the production of the moment. Its form is invariable, *terza rima*, with trochaic rhythm, so that improvisation is not difficult, and when the *prima voceratrice* pauses, the whole wild chorus of women burst in with

"Ahi, ahi, ahi!"

in long drawn ululation. The *voceri* which have grown into a literature are full of power and pathos; and the sole fault which I find with Mr. Russell Martineau, translator of the *Corsica* of Gregorovius, is that—not being a poet—he has ventured on quasi-poetic versions of those *voceri*.

The *Seagull* ran into the harbour of Isola Rossa early in the morning.

The song of the *voceratrici* was audible from the Casa Montalti. Neither Langton nor Palliser knew the meaning of the mournful dirge which swept across the waters. Isola had gone below at Ajaccio, where her companions had business ashore, and so was asleep on their arrival.

Stephen landed alone, and made his way to the Casa Montalti. He entered its chief room, hot and stifling after the fresh breeze on the schooner's deck. The *tola* was there; on the *tola*, dressed almost in white, but with a few black patches here and there, lay the corpse of Fiordilisa Branscombe, beautiful in death. The women of the *scirrata* were whirling in a wild dance as he came forward. Suddenly, with miraculous simultaneity, they fell as if crushed into a sitting posture; their heads buried between their knees, their arms above their heads. One only, younger than Fiordilisa, and almost as lovely, burst into the *vocero*—

"'Where?' he cries to the bloody isle—
'Where?' he cries to the coral beach—
'Where shall I meet my mother's smile?

"'Who of my father's strength will teach?
Surely he was a hero stern.'
Vainly, alas! those lips beseech—

"Vainly ever the boy must yearn.
Dead in his bed the father lies.
Dead his mother ye now discern.

"Baby boy, with thy father's eyes,
Woe! for revenge thou ne'er shalt see.
Never shalt wield the steel that flies

"Straight to the heart that orphaned thee!
Baby boy, with thy father's eyes!
Chief of thy mother's blood was he.

"Ahi! ahi! ahi!"

Thus went on the interminable *vocero*, of which I have striven to give a brief example in English. Stephen listened sadly till the impassioned young *voceratrice*, wearied by her wild song, sank suddenly down among her chorus. He had not much to learn. Angelo Montalti had come back to Isola Rossa proclaiming himself the avenger of blood. But his dread deed had not reached the ears of Fiordilisa. She was dying when he returned—dying from weakness—having given birth to a son. She did not see her grandfather, heard nothing of his story, passed calmly into another world within a day or two of her husband. All that she had strength to say had reference to her boy.

"Name him Raphael."

Well had the *voceratrice* told of this young new-comer's having his father's eyes. To Stephen it seemed that the Seraph's weird glance had issued from those baby orbs. And the women told him that the child must have been born almost at the very moment that, according to Angelo's narrative, Raphael was slain. Stephen was a dreamer, you know, and had a predisposition to believe in metempsychosis. Had Raphael already commenced a second career in the person of his newborn son? The idea caused him to shudder. There was something uncanny about Raphael; but Raphael reappearing as a baby would be dreadful. He did not half like the look of this young Branscombe. Where was Angelo? He had gone to the *macchia*, after telling the people of Isola Rossa what he had done. Of course, knowing human nature only in its special form of Corsican nature, he assumed that Raphael's relations would immediately vow vendetta against him and hunt him down mercilessly. Consequently he fled at once into the wild forests about Mount Patro, prepared to live by the *fusile* if needful. So there were Raphael and Fiordilisa dead and Angelo in his old days gone to the mountains, and none to inherit the Montalti property save this little creature, who, in Stephen's eyes, seemed preternaturally sagacious—a miniature edition of the Seraph. Well, what was he, Stephen Langton, to do? He

must act, evidently, as Raphael's representative. He must see what arrangement could be made for the young heir of the Branscombes of Branscombe. This was an important matter. To him would come a great estate in England; he must not be left to a mere Corsican education.

Well, he would talk to Isola about it. Again, he must endeavour to bring old Angelo Montalti home again. The old man doubtless would despise a race so mild that their young chief might be slain—and no vendetta. And, on the other hand, if Devil Branscombe or the Wolf could, in their present temper, get hold of the venerable Corsican, there would be a pretty swift end of him. Still, Stephen thought it best to bring him home again, and resolved to send in search of him as early as possible.

Soundly had Isola slept in the small but daintily appointed cabin of Palliser's yacht. When she awoke it wanted scarce an hour of noon. When she emerged from the snowy drapery of her narrow couch she felt a strange, inexplicable sense of happiness. For the moment, so sound had been her dreamless sleep, she forgot where she was. What had happened? Why was she so happy? Why was she in so quaint a chamber? She arose and looked from a tiny window. Over the calm sunlit sea she beheld Isola Rossa—the little town carved upon the Grecian urn which Keats had made immortal—so still and silent, so unravished a bride of quietness, that you might well suppose it a mere picture, the work of some magical artist. Truly, it looked all unlike the home of the wild passion that drove Angelo Montalti with murderous poniard across the Tyrrhene Sea, or of the fierce lamentations and clamorous music which all that morning had surged around Fiordilisa's corpse. It was a picture of tranquillity. Isola threw open the window and inhaled the soft low wind, and feasted her eyes upon that strangely silent shore, where not a human creature seemed to dwell. Ah! she knew now where she was. She knew why she was so happy. Never, never, never could she forget the magical Straits of Bonifazio. The *bouchette coraline* gave a delicious little pout as she thought of it. If Stephen could have seen! Why, was not that Stephen in the stern of the *Seagull's* boat, just putting off from shore? and here she was *en chemise!* She had not thought of dressing yet. She rushed to the fair water in the great hip-bath, and there resulted a considerable splashing.

We are not Actæons, gentle reader, nor do we resemble Musidora's lover in Mr. Thomson's *Seasons*. So it need only be recorded that beautiful little Isola was on deck—as fresh as paint—in time to receive Stephen when he came on board. I need not say that she had made the most charming toilette possible in a small schooner yacht. But her bright eyes, and half-parted lips, and rose-flushed cheeks were worth more than the most *coquette falbala* in the world. Stephen was a lucky dog beyond doubt.

It may well be supposed that Isola's advice to Stephen in the present posture of affairs coincided with what Stephen had devised. Surely if they were not now, they never would be of one mind. Search was made for Angelo, in the first instance. It did not take long to find him. At a patriarchal age, the noble Corsican was not so sure-footed as in his hot youth, when Pasquale Paoli was ruler of Corsica; and he had unhappily lost his way on the outskirts of the Monte Rotondo, and fallen over a precipice of the Frate. He was recognised at once by those who found the body, for the chief of the Montalti was well known from Corte to Cape Corso.

And so there was another *vocero* in Isola Rossa. If I were writing a poem instead of a novel, I would strive to bring before my readers the wild scene of lamentations when the *scirrata* came a second time to the Casa Montalti. But this present generation of readers likes not funeral celebrations. Deaths as many as you please, and as strange in their form—but do not invite us to the funerals. Who can be expected to mourn, when the puppet of modern romance—the novelist's doll—is hurled over a cliff, or stabbed in his bed, or otherwise done away with? If you had created men and women, says the reader, you wouldn't be in such a hurry to kill them. I think the reader is right. There shall be no murder or sudden death in my next story.

Seagull Palliser was despatched in his yacht to Sorrento, to carry the news to Ralph and Marmaduke Branscombe. It was an unpleasant errand, but Palliser was a good fellow; besides, he carried his information in copious epistles from Stephen and Isola to the two old gentlemen and Claudia. And the result of his embassy was, that Ralph and Marmaduke—but not Claudia—returned in the *Seagull*, and saw Stephen and Isola married by the same priest who had joined together Raphael and Fiordilisa. It was not so joyous a wedding, but it had some promise of happiness, nevertheless.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TEN YEARS AFTER.

THE cathedral city of Idlechester is as pleasant every whit as when we visited it last, ten years ago. The new Bishop is more respected than his predecessor, if not so popular. A prelate with no definite opinions, and a gay young wife, and a predilection for good dinners, is likely to be more popular than a bachelor Bishop with very definite opinions, indeed, and a strong tendency to epigram. But Bishop Winter has done good work in his diocese, and has led the Church Militant with great effect in the House of Lords. Pert young peers who think it fine to let off fluent flippancies against the Church of England, are in

the habit of selecting nights when the Bishop of Idlechester is absent. They are as much afraid of him as were the *mauvais sujets* of Kingsleat Grammar School. "The severe Winter" cuts as keenly as ever.

Old Langton the tanner has been dead some years. He died insolvent, so that Stephen derived little profit from the will which made him his grandfather's sole heir. The present occupant of the tanyard is a scientific tanner; precious little oak bark does he use in the manufacture of leather; he is one of the pioneers of that supreme civilisation which produces shams which surpass the original, and extracts exquisite colours from gas refuse, and delicious odours from ordure. The wearers of boots may have cause to regret this scientific tanning, but let the lovers of the oak tree rejoice. Still there is "nothing like leather"—for wearing out. What has become of all the young Langtons I know not. Turned commercial travellers, probably. It was their apparent destiny. Aunt Harriet lives in a cottage in the suburbs of the city, receiving an annuity from Stephen, and devoting herself with genial perseverance to the education of servant girls. She has but one ancilla at a time, but she seldom keeps her beyond a week. The unhappy young woman can by no chance do anything right. Aunt Harriet has no patience with such hussies.

Dr. Winter was succeeded in the head mastership of Kingsleat Grammar School by his second master, a very dull man indeed. Yet the school flourishes as to numbers, though its pupils don't take honours. That this poor, stout, fussy, incapable Corfe, whom Dr. Winter continued in his position as second master from sheer pity, should be permitted to destroy the renown of Kingsleat school, is a sharp thorn in the episcopal flesh, and it were vain to waste Greek epigrams on Corfe, who couldn't construe them—or understand them if translated.

Mr. Lonsdale is still the librarian of the famous Kingsleat Library. The other day the Duke of Axminster was in Berlin, and made the acquaintance of a certain Chevalier Bunsen.

The Duke, a thoroughpaced aristocrat, would believe in nothing till it had received aristocratic patronage. He assumed that there was something in poetry, when Lord Byron condescended to write it. Your Wordsworths and Rogerses might have gone on as long as they pleased, and his Grace would not have read them. If he had lived to see the Earl of Derby translating the "Iliad," he would have patronised Homer. When a Bunsen talked of the early monarchs of Egypt, the Duke was affably interested. It was his fate to be also surprised.

"When I go to England," said the Chevalier, "one of my first visits will be to a place called Kingsleat. Do you know it?"

"I have a residence close to it."

"Ah, then, you may know a Mr. Lonsdale, perhaps. He corresponds with me. He has a profound knowledge of these sub-

jects. I wish he would publish his theories. I shall go to sit at his feet and drink in his wisdom."

"Gad," thought the duke, "Winter saved me from making a greater mistake than I imagined."

But Mr. Lonsdale never published his theories, being well content that they should be incorporated in the system of an expounder far more influential than himself.

The fine old Manor-house of Branscombe has been restored and superbly furnished, and is indeed the chief show-place of the country. But the head of the house never dwelt there. The sudden death of his son was too much for him. There was no work of revenge for him to do, for the assassin was dead. He saw his son's son, but took little interest in him; and, within a year of Raphael's death, the old man lay beside him at Sorrento.

But Marmaduke was determined to see the old place fitly restored. He gave himself up to it with extreme energy. He also took the amplest legal precautions to secure the estates, now free from mortgages, to Raphael's son—and, failing him, to the male issue of Stephen and Isola. The young Raphael was left to Stephen Langton's sole guardianship. When he had made these arrangements, and seen the Manor-house in a perfect state of restoration, the old Wolf suddenly disappeared, giving no clue to his whereabouts.

Mr. Page's quiet residence in Idlechester, with its dainty gardens, was inhabited by two ladies. You might see them walking together in those exquisite avenues of colour and perfume where Stephen Langton had in his boyhood led enchanted hours. The elder of them was strange to look upon—strange, yet beautiful. Abundant tresses had she upon her shapely head, but every hair was white as snow. The dark eyes, in which had burned the flame of love, of wrath, of disdain, were luminous still; but in their depths dwelt a tranquil melancholy, a divine pity for her companion.

And her companion also was exquisite in beauty, but when you looked upon her eyes you saw no meaning there. Their light was quenched. All through the long years of her death in life, never again would a recognising glance flash from those sweet brown eyes which Stephen Langton loved of yore. What had chanced to the soul to which that beautiful body was now a prison, a mansion no longer? Claudia could not guess. It was impossible to say whether any memory of the past, any clear knowledge of the present, was possessed by this stricken creature. The sensuous enjoyment of the summer garden, of the winter fireside, she seemed to feel: but she spoke seldom, and only once or twice during Claudia's sisterly tendence of her did she break through the even tenor of her life. Only once or twice, early in the morning, she had sprung from her bed, and torn away her night-dress with trembling hands, moaning—

"*His blood! His blood!*"

Claudia tended her with pitiful remorseful tendence. She gave up her life to her cousin. When Raphael died, and Stephen wedded Isola, the Panther resigned her passionate pursuit of excitement. She took sweet Anne Page away to England, with Morfill's full consent, and dwelt with her in the old Idlechester house, and lived a very tranquil, very solitary life. She did daily, hourly penance for the past. There were men of the world and women of fashion in London who still remembered the renown of the Panther—her beauty and daring and caprice; but Miss Branscombe, of Idlechester, was only known for her kindness to the poor, and the retired life which she led with her imbecile cousin. Few visitors had she save her Uncle Walter, whose decaying years found their chief solace in intercourse with the niece once so wild and now so calm; for his daughter had deserted him to become Lady Superior of a Protestant nunnery, and the Rector was left alone. As to Humphrey Morfill, he went back to his profession with double energy. He is now Solicitor-General and M.P. for Idlechester, and occasionally passes the recess with his uncle, the Bishop, who forgave him when he saw his terrible punishment. Sir Humphrey may probably take his seat on the Woolsack as Lord Kingsleat one of those days.

. . . . . .

Stephen Langton accepted the charge of Raphael Branscombe's son. The boy was half English, half Corsican. Stephen decided that he should pass his early boyhood at least amid the Homeric simplicity of his native island. Stephen determined to dwell at the Casa Montalti—to explore the whole romantic island—to make Raphael's son a daring boatman, a resolute swimmer, a strong-lunged and sure-footed mountaineer. For himself, he would give his leisure to literature—would write a history of Corsica, or an epic with Pasquale Paoli as hero, or a drama with Napoleon as protagonist.

Upon the coral-tinged sands of Isola Rossa behold a pleasant group, gazing on the sapphire sea, and waiting for the *Fantasia*, a good sea-boat still, which has gone round to Ajaccio for the letters and parcels by the Marseilles mail. Stephen is the most prominent figure, bronzed, bearded, broad-shouldered, in the very prime of his life, widely changed from the fair-haired boy who loitered in the Idlechester gardens with sweet Anne Page. Isola looks matronly, of course; but it is a very dainty presentment of matronhood; and how sparkles still her silver laughter, how deliciously she sings *voceri* at sunset for the children's delight! For there are children. Not only Raphael's wild and wayward boy—but a couple of other young rascals. Stephen and Claude, and a pretty little girl just five years old, who was fantastically christened Isola Rossa, and who had done her utmost to deserve the appellation by growing hair whose colour would fill Millais or Leighton with ecstacy. Barefooted and bareheaded, these merry

young Corsicans play upon the ruddy-veined sand, while Stephen smokes his cigar and dreams, and Isola calmly drinks in the ever-more magical beauty of the familiar scene.

There was in Stephen Langton's temperament a touch of Goethe's artistic enjoying, with the belief (Homeric but anti-Tennysonian) that man is superior to woman. "The reduction of the masculine character to insignificance" is, as Mr. Herman Merivale remarks (*Historical Studies*, p. 174, note), the "first peculiarity" of Tennyson, and doubtless tends to that "enormous popularity" (among women and effeminate men) which his works have attained. But Mr. Tennyson's is not a true view of human nature. Stephen, however, while he had the Goethe capacity for sensuous enjoyment and for Homeric simplicity, had not passed in Corsica these ten delicious years without frequent desires for some interruption of the divine monotone—"something craggy to break upon," as Byron called it. A long catenation of similar events is apt to become intolerable—even though each event be pleasant—even though you live like Laertes of old in a divine island like Corsica, with a wife as beautiful and brilliant as the most poetic imagination can conceive, and with sturdy Corsican boys whom you teach to swim and row, and climb, and speak the truth and reverence God, and read *Hamlet* and the *Odyssey* in the original, and a charming baby girl, elf, witch, fairy, embryo woman, whom you leave to her mother to teach what she will. So Stephen found himself now and then longing for a change, and would perhaps have welcomed a temporary change for the worse. The dwellers in Olympus may know content, but to us articulate-speaking mortals it is not given.

Besides, Stephen Langton was too thorough an Englishman to satisfy himself with Goethe's segment of the sphere of life. He often felt very strongly that there must be duties for him to do at home. Echoes, rare and remote, of the life in England—which in his heart he deemed the noblest life liveable among men—came to him across land and sea. Seldom arrived the mail without bringing him some new impulse thitherward. This *fainéant* life shamed him now and then. Besides, there were these boys to educate—young Raphael, ten years old, keen as a falcon, with all his father's spirit and all the stern resolve of the Montalti, inheritor of two destinies, was fit for Eton now. The other youngsters would soon require a public school. He was silently ripening his determination to move for England as he awaited the coming of the *Fantasia*.

The boat came swiftly round the point at last. Stephen sprang to his feet and put his glass to his eye. There sat in the stern an unexpected voyager, a kingly-throated, mighty-shouldered, patriarch-bearded man, steering the light craft through the glittering surf.

"Hallo, Isola," said Stephen, "here's a stranger."

The boat was run ashore; the three boys, waist-deep in the water, were clamorously welcoming the new-comer with

"Evviva! evviva! benvenuto!"

Isola, light-footed as a fawn, sprang forward to welcome—her father.

. . . . . .

Ay, the old Wolf had arrived. Where had he been? Well, this story is a romance; and I doubt not the critics will cut it up severely for its improbabilities, impossibilities, absurdities; but if I were to tell you all the details of the old Wolf's adventures in those ten years it would utterly horrify those same critics. From the "Thousand and One Nights" down to dear Captain Marryat's "Pasha of Many Tales," nothing has been recorded so incredible as Mr. Marmaduke Branscombe's adventures. They were told to his grandchildren by the wood fire in the great hall at Branscombe, and lasted many a winter night, and I rather think of collecting them, under the taking title of "The Old Wolf's Yarns."

For, having returned with intent to settle quietly, Marmaduke Branscombe enforced upon Stephen Langton the importance of going back to England. Branscombe ought to be inhabited; Raphael the younger ought to be prepared for his coming career as an English squire of ancient race; all the boys ought to be educated; ay, and the younger Isola—Isola Rossa—ought to be indoctrinated in English young ladyhood, and to be made avoid slang and cultivate hypocrisy. This last Isola the elder believed she would never learn.

Of course, when everybody is very much of the same opinion there is no difficulty in action. And, the moment he had seriously entertained the question, Stephen began to pine for England. The idea flashed upon him that he was just of the age to begin life seriously. After a boyhood and youth of adventure and love, he had every chance of obtaining renown in his manhood. This long isolation in Corsica with his wife and children and books and dreams, with the mountains and the Mediterranean and poetry, would be no bad preparative for an energetic career in England. So it was not long before the bells rang welcome in Kingsleat and Idlechester—before the old Wolf had found himself a grim dark lair in the most ancient part of the Manor-house—before Raphael and Stephen and Claude and Isola Rossa were laughing on the lawns, and romping with the dogs, and riding the ponies of the rare old place—before Mrs. Langton was receiving the calls of county and city, and Stephen was thinking—"What next?"

I leave Stephen Langton at Branscombe.